

桜庭一樹

Kazuki Sakuraba

GOSICK

—ミステック—

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—ゴシック—

角川ビーンズ文庫







ヴィクトリカはさよろさよろし続ける。

「あれはなんだ？」

「アイスクリーム屋だよ」

「あれは？」

「新聞売り」

「あれは？」

一弥はヴィクトリカとじつかりと手をつなぐ。
ヴィクトリカが、
あちこちに歩き出してしまわないように。

「どうしてこんなに大荷物なんだよっ！
キミ、おかしいよ、ヴィクトリカ」

「これはだな、わたしのこの頭脳が
英知を尽くして考えた、
旅行に最低限必要な持ち物、なのだ」



くじょう さすけ
久城 一弥

極東の島国よりソヴール王国に留学してきた、心優しく優等生。怪物で正義感に溢れた、軍人一家の三男。

ヴィクトリカ

書物・甘いお菓子・フリルを愛する、謎多き天才美少女。図書館塔最上階で膨大な書物を読むのが自慢。

GOSICK

ゴシック

イラスト / 武田日向



グレヴィール

地元警察署警部。色男だが、昔はなぜかドリルのような奇怪な髪型をしている。



アプリル・ブラッドリー

英国から学園に留学してきた怪談好きの美少女。冒険家サー・ブラッドリーの孫娘。



セシル先生

一弥とヴィクトリカのクラス担任教師。大きな丸眼鏡が印象的な童顔の女性。

CHARACTERS

ロクサーヌ …学園近くに住む老占い師。

ネッド・バクスター …イギリスの舞台俳優。

ジュリア・ガイル …炭坑所有者の令嬢。

モーリス …ソヴール王国外務省幹部。

Table of Contents

- Cover
- Color Illustrations
- Characters
- Prologue: Let the Hares Loose!
- Chapter 1: The Golden Fairy
- Monologue 1
- Chapter 2: A Dark Supper
- Monologue 2
- Chapter 3: The Ghost Ship Queen Berry
- Monologue 3
- Chapter 4: The Hares and the Hound
- Monologue 4
- Chapter 5: Game Over
- Monologue 5
- Chapter 6: Never Let Go
- Epilogue: A Promise
- Credits

She ran across the field after it, and fortunately was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge. In another moment, down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.

—*Lewis Carroll*, *Alice in Wonderland*

Prologue: Let the Hares Loose!

A huge, black shape darted past.

A dog, the child thought. A dog as black as darkness itself, blending into the twilight. A hound. Its limbs were glossy black, and its two eyes flickered in the dark like blue flames.

The child had just made it through the dark forest and onto the village road. It was too late to be out on an errand. He couldn't wait to get home to the warmth of the fireplace. Wanting to take a shortcut, he decided to pass through a property located on the outskirts of the village, but as soon as he stepped into the garden, he encountered the hound.

The child took a few steps back.

Splat.

There was an unpleasant sensation under his foot. He had stepped on something soft and filled with warm fluid. He looked down and saw a small lump of soggy flesh. Red flesh. Blood oozed from brown fur. Long, fluffy ears peeked out from within the mass of flesh. Round eyes like marbles, dismal and empty, reflected the darkness of the night sky.

A hare, he realized.

He lifted his head. Fresh blood trickled from the hound's closed muzzle.

This thing ate it!

His hand went limp. The bottle of wine that he was holding tight slowly fell to the ground, shattering to pieces. A splash of reddish purple liquid landed on the hound's head.

The dog slithered out its tongue.

Thunder rumbled overhead.

A flash of light briefly illuminated the house. Old and crumbling, it was supposed to be abandoned, but on its terrace was an unfamiliar figure.

The child's eyes widened.

A person covered in red cloth from head to toe was sitting in a wheelchair. The cloth peeled back a little, revealing a dark cavern instead of a head. A hand was sticking out from inside the cloth, so old and thin that it

looked like a withered branch. It was hard to believe that it belonged to a living person.

The hand was trembling as it gripped a golden mirror tight.

Three jars—silver, copper, and a glass one—sat on the terrace, gleaming eerily.

“A young man will soon die!” bellowed an old, hoarse voice.

The child swallowed. It was the voice of an old woman. He felt terrified, as if every ominous thing the woman had said would come true.

“That death will be the beginning of everything,” she continued. “The world will turn to stone and start to tumble!”

Voices of men came from what should have been an empty terrace. Astonished, the child strained his eyes, but darkness had blanketed the terrace once more.

“What...”

“What should we do...?”

“Madame Roxane!”

“A box,” the old woman said. “Prepare a bigger box. Bigger than this garden. Let it float on water...”

Thunder crashed.

A white flash illuminated the terrace and the garden.

The child’s knees buckled at what he saw, and he let out a squeal.

On the terrace was an old woman garbed in red, surrounded by people. Clad in white cloaks, they wandered around with outstretched hands like ghosts.

Round, brown shapes were scuttling across the garden. More than a dozen hares were frantically running around while the hound chased and gnawed them to death. A few shapes lay on the ground, creating pools of blood.

The lightning faded, and darkness enveloped the house and garden once more.

There was silence.

And then...

“And set the hares loose!” the old woman cried.

Chapter 1: The Golden Fairy

Ten years later...

The Kingdom of Sauville, a small country in Europe.

Nestled at the foot of a mountain range was St. Marguerite Academy. Behind the U-shaped, magnificent stone building, two students were eagerly engaged in a conversation.

“...And when the rescue team arrived on the cruise ship, there was still warm food on the dinner plates. The fireplace was blazing, and playing cards were laid out on the table. But get this! There was no one there. The passengers, the crew, they were all gone. There were rooms with blood and signs of struggle, but not a single soul around.”

“Ahuh, ahuh.”

Leaving the small door to the courtyard open, they sat on the second step of the three-step stairs, leaning towards each other. In front of them was a flower bed, where colorful flowers were blooming and swaying in the pleasant spring breeze.



One was an earnest-looking Asian boy of small build and the other was a slender, blond Caucasian girl.

The boy's name was Kazuya Kujou, a foreign student from an island country in the Orient, while the girl's name was Avril Bradley, an exchange student from England. They had only been in the same class for a short time, but as fellow exchange students, they grew closer and were able to talk to each other without much reservation.

Avril was so absorbed in her story that her pretty face looked comical, her eyes a little crossed. Her short, blond hair bobbed in the wind.

"...And then."

"Go on."

"When the rescue team was examining the ship, one guy casually touched a vase, and an arrow came flying from somewhere and almost killed him."

"How? Was there some sort of mechanism in the vase? Or maybe someone was hiding and shot the bow gun right when they touched the vase? Or..."

Avril pouted. When Kazuya rambled on, not noticing her annoyance, she covered his mouth with the palm of her white hand.

"...Hmm?!"

"Just listen, okay?" Avril chided. "I'm getting to the important part. You're too serious, it's boring."

"...Sorry," he said, not entirely sure what he was apologizing for. But since she was a girl, he reflexively gave in. "Go ahead."

"Okay. So after calling the coast guard, the rescue team tried to check the ship, but the haul was flooded. The Queen Berry sank to the bottom of the sea shortly after, before they even had time to investigate. With a huge splash and an ominous groan, it sank lower and lower into the dark depths!"

"Must have been tough."

"But!" Undeterred by Kazuya's flippant remark, Avril raised her voice. "That ship that was supposed to have sunk ten years ago has been reappearing ever since."

"No way. You just said it sank."

"Hush. Just shut up and listen."

"...Sorry."

“On stormy nights, the ship suddenly appears from beyond the mists, with the missing people still onboard. They lure the living into the ship and offer them as sacrifice...”

Avril lowered her voice, and Kazuya waited patiently with bated breath.

She snapped her blue eyes wide open. “Sinking the ship along with them! Kyaaaaa!”

Kazuya screamed.

“Ahahaha! I got you, Kujou! You screamed. A horror story made a boy *and* a soldier’s son scream! Ahaha!”

“D-Darn it...” Kazuya cursed, hanging his head.

Avril stood up and dusted her bottom. Her pleated uniform skirt swayed, revealing long, white legs.

The weather was fine, the sun shining brightly on the stone stairs behind the school building. Kazuya squinted against the brightness.

“All right, let’s head back to class,” Avril said. “I must say, I didn’t expect you to be a scaredy-cat. You get good grades, and you always have this serious look on your face. You’re like the perfect example of a boy from a military family. Who would’ve thought you had this side of you?”

Teased by the triumphant Avril, Kazuya hung his head even lower.

“I won,” Avril added. “Yay!”

Watching her skip back into the school building, Kazuya swore to himself.

I’m gonna find scarier horror stories for her. And I’ll make her scream. I’ll pay her back for this. In the name of the third son of an Imperial soldier!

Feeling bitter, Kazuya followed Avril inside.

When he entered the classroom, it was filled with the usual students—Caucasian children from noble families, about fifteen years old or so.

Boys with fine cuffs and tie pins and girls with well-groomed hair and nails sat at lavish desks made of fine oak. Wearing straight faces, they were slim and had porcelain skin.

When with them, the serious-looking Asian boy, Kazuya Kujou, stood out quite a bit. In fact, as soon as he walked into the classroom, his classmates began whispering among themselves while casting quick glances at him.

“It’s the Reaper...”

“He’s back...”

Hearing their murmurs in elegant French, Kazuya grew even more upset.

The year 1924.

The Kingdom of Sauville, a small nation in Europe.

Its border with Switzerland was marked with picturesque plateaus and rolling mountains. A tranquil expanse of vineyards sprawled on its border with France. A bustling port city facing the Mediterranean Sea separated it from Italy. One end of its long and narrow territory led deep into the abundant Alps and the other end faced the Gulf of Lyon, known as a summer resort for aristocrats. Surrounded by powers, the Kingdom of Sauville survived the world war and boasted a pleasant climate, rich nature, and a long and grand history.

If the Gulf of Lyon was the luxurious door to the kingdom, the Alps were the secret attic located deep inside. At the foot of the mountain range stood St. Marguerite Academy. Boasting a long history, though not as long as the kingdom itself, it was a prestigious school with a reputation in the kingdom as being *the* educational institution for the children of aristocracy. Lush greenery surrounded its majestic U-shaped stone building, but it was also closed to the public, and only accessible to educators and students of noble descent.

However, after the end of the previous war—the first world war that involved several countries—St. Marguerite Academy began accepting promising youth from allied nations as exchange students.

Kazuya Kujou, a fifteen-year-old from an island nation in the Orient, was a high-achieving, youngest son of a military family. His two older brothers were far older than him. One was already a scholar and the other an aspiring politician. Taking all this into account, he was selected to be a foreign exchange student. He came to Sauville alone half a year ago.

However, what awaited the thrilled Kazuya was the prejudice of the noble children and the mysterious horror stories that were rampant throughout the academy.

Kazuya’s fierce aura stemmed from his straight-laced attitude and good nature, but for some reason, students attributed it to the supernatural. As

such, it had been a difficult six months for the young man... but that's a story for another time.

A bell signaled the start of class. As Kazuya took his seat with the rest of the students, his eyes flickered to an empty seat by the window.

In the past six months, he had never once seen the owner of the seat. It was always empty. But no one from the class sat in it, approached it, or put anything on it, as though they had some sort of agreement beforehand. It was like they were afraid of something.

At this point, though, he already knew what they were afraid of.

The homeroom teacher entered the classroom. A petite woman with a baby face, she wore large, round glasses and had wavy, brown hair. She always clutched books in front of her chest with both hands, tilting her head a little to the side like a puppy.

The teacher—Ms. Cecile—stood in front of the platform and let out a sigh.

Hmm? Kazuya noticed Ms. Cecile's low spirits.

A rolled-up piece of paper came flying from behind him, hitting his head. He picked it up and unfolded it.

Can you go to the bathroom by yourself tonight, Kujou the scaredy-cat? From Avril.

He looked over his shoulder and saw Avril waving at him with a wide smile. *Well, someone's in a good mood.* He wondered if it was her way of showing affection.

After class ended, Ms. Cecile was about to leave the classroom when she suddenly stopped in her tracks.

"Kujou," she called. "Do you have a minute?"

Kazuya got up and followed the teacher out into the hallway. He wondered if his grades dropped or something.

"I need your help with this." She handed him printouts used in the class just now, and pointed at the empty seat by the window. "Sorry for bothering you all the time, but can you take this to Victorique?"

"I see... Okay, I will."

As Kazuya nodded, a slender shadow moved beside him. He raised his head and saw Avril's pretty face. Her short, blonde hair was glistening from the sunlight pouring through the window.

She peered at the printouts. “Teach, is this Victorique the one who’s always absent?”

“Yes,” Ms. Cecile replied. “But they actually come to school. Right, Kujou?”

Kazuya gave a vague nod.

Avril cocked her head curiously. “What do you mean by that? Where are they, then?”

“...In the botanical garden.”

“What? A botanical garden? I don’t recall there being anything like that in the academy.”

“Oh, but there *is* one.” Kazuya’s face clouded over for some reason. “Somewhere very high up.”

“For real? So are you close with this Victorique?” Avril asked.

Ms. Cecile nodded delightfully, while Kazuya just tilted his head a little. Avril looked more and more puzzled. “So is that a yes or a no?”

“I’m not really sure either,” Kazuya said.

“Can you be more clear? What kind of a boy is he?”

“Terrifying... blunt... and mean...”

Still regarding him quizzically, Avril mumbled, “Well, whatever,” then skipped her way back into the classroom.

“...Um, Ms. Cecile,” Kazuya called as the teacher was about to leave.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“You seem kinda down... I was just wondering what’s up.”

Ms. Cecile’s big eyes widened even more. “I can’t believe you noticed. Actually, it’s not school-related. There was a strange incident back at the village. The police were asking questions all morning.”

“An incident?”

Ms. Cecile lowered her voice. There was fear in her eyes, presumably because of what happened in her neighborhood.

“Well, you see... It’s a very strange case. What I know, I only got from the police and some gossip among the neighbors.”

“What kind of a case is it?”

“An old lady living on the outskirts of the village was murdered. And in a very strange way.”

“An old lady?”

“They say she used to be a famous fortune teller. I think her name was Roxane. Politicians and business executives used to flock to her. Apparently, she was good at telling the future.”

“Ms. Cecile, fortune telling is nothing but—” Before he could say “superstition”, he noticed the teacher’s weary look, so he shut his mouth.

“I heard they haven’t caught the killer yet, so I can’t help but feel scared. Anyway, she was killed in a strange manner. I’m not sure exactly what that means, though.”

Ms. Cecile told Kazuya what she had learned from the police and some gossip that had been circulating in the neighborhood. To summarize, the fortune teller had been shot dead in a locked room, but the murder weapon was never found, and the killer was unidentified.

“It’s scary, but I’ll just have to be a little patient. Inspector Grevil de Blois is tackling the case. He’s an officer who’s recently made a name for himself. He’s conducting an investigation in the village, together with a couple of his subordinates.”

“Now that doesn’t sound weird at all,” Kazuya muttered to himself.

Ms. Cecile eyed him curiously. “The old lady herself was full of mystery. Apparently, she had a lot of hares in her house, and she let her dog kill them. Poor things. Must’ve been terrified.”

She seemed to be frightened by the dark and eerie atmosphere surrounding the case. When she noticed Kazuya’s worried look, she flashed a smile and pointed at the printouts.

“I’m counting on you, Kujou,” she said. “I know it’s a bit high... but hang in there!”

“I will. I’m used to it anyway.” He nodded with a dry laugh.

St. Marguerite Grand Library.

Standing quietly in a corner of the campus was one of Europe’s foremost bookhouses, with over 300 years of history behind it. Its majestic stone-built exterior could easily be a tourist attraction, but St. Marguerite Academy didn’t allow non-related personnel inside the campus, so it was rarely seen by the public.

Kazuya’s footsteps crunched along the dry path. He arrived at the library, and went inside.

Shaped like a polygonal tube, the building’s entire walls themselves were giant bookshelves. The middle section was hollow all the way to the

ceiling, where grand religious paintings glittered. A narrow wooden staircase connected the bookshelves like a huge, perilous maze.

Kazuya looked up and sighed. He glimpsed what seemed like a long, golden sash hanging down from near the ceiling.

“Victorique... Way up there as always, huh?”

Reluctantly, he began climbing the stairs.

“I wish she’d hang around somewhere lower sometimes. Does she climb these stairs every single day? Talk about diligent.”

As he climbed higher, the floor receded further away. Looking down made him dizzy, so Kazuya stared straight ahead, straightened his back like the third son of an imperial soldier, and kept climbing. He started to get out of breath halfway, but he pushed on.

“Why’s the library like this anyway?”

According to one theory, this grand library was built in the early 17th century by the king, the founder of St. Marguerite Academy. A henpecked husband, he created a secret room at the top of the library so he could indulge in the company of his mistress. He also arranged for the stairs to be like a maze.

At the beginning of the current century, hydraulic elevators were installed during some restoration work, but Kazuya had not had the chance to use it as they were for faculty members only.

So he had no choice but to climb. Up, up, and up through the maze of stairs. Still a long way to go.

When Kazuya finally reached the top floor, he called, “Victorique, are you there?”

There was no reply.

But he continued anyway. “I know you’re there. I saw your hair. Hello?” He addressed the golden hair hanging down.

Thin, white smoke rose to the ceiling.

Kazuya took a step forward. And there was the botanical garden.

The secret room at the top of the library was no longer a bedroom for the king and his mistress, but had been rebuilt into a lush greenhouse. Thriving tropical trees and ferns glittered under the soft sunlight streaming in through the skylight.

It was a bright and unfrequented botanical garden.

A large, porcelain doll was sitting on the landing that led to the greenhouse.

It was nearly life-size, about a hundred and forty centimeters tall. Dressed in a lavish outfit of silk and lace, its long, magnificent blonde hair hung down to the floor like an untied turban.

Its face looked as cool as porcelain. Wizen, pale emerald eyes, neither childlike nor mature, gleamed softly.

The porcelain doll had a pipe in its mouth, smoking. Thin wisps of smoke rose toward the skylight.

Kazuya approached the porcelain doll—no, the beautiful girl who looked like a doll.

“You could at least answer me, Victorique.”

The girl’s green eyes swept over the books laid out on the floor. Arranged in a circular pattern around her, they ranged from ancient history to modern science, mechanics, curses and alchemy. The language in which they were written varied from English to French, Latin to Chinese.

The girl—Victorique—came to her senses and raised her head.

She regarded Kazuya’s disgruntled face. “Oh, it’s you.”

Her voice was low and raspy like an old person’s, not what you’d expect from someone with a petite frame and bewitching features.

Her unbearable, snobbish attitude—a common trait to the nobility—ticked Kazuya off. Not that it was anything new from her. Every time he came, Victorique always found a way to annoy him.

When he remained silent, Victorique turned her gaze back to the books.

“What does the Reaper want with me?” she asked as she leafed through the pages.

“Don’t call me that.” Hanging his head low, Kazuya leaned against the railing of the stairs.

The Reaper was Kazuya’s unwelcome alias. The students of the academy had a penchant for the supernatural, and with the school’s rich history, there was no shortage of them. Such as a traveler arriving during spring bringing death to the academy, or a demon dwelling on the thirteenth step of the stairs, and many more.

Kazuya Kujou, a quiet traveler from the Orient with black hair and jet-black eyes, was designated as the Springtime Reaper. Students who loved horror stories stayed away from him. He didn’t know how much they

actually believed in these stories, but the students of the academy played along, hyping up what seemed like a game to them.

This is why Kazuya had not been able to make any close friends, and thanks to Ms. Cecile, he became a liaison, or perhaps an attendant, to Victorique, the biggest oddball of the academy.

It wasn't that he liked being in this pretty girl's company, but he found himself climbing the maze of stairs to see her anyway.

"Kujou," Victorique said, ignoring his brooding, "I know you can't make friends, but I did not expect you to come to me again. You never grow tired. Or do you like the stairs perhaps?"

"Of course not. Here." He showed her the printouts that the teacher gave him.

Victorique pointed to the floor with her nose as if to say, "Put it there."

Kazuya then turned to leave when Victorique, her face buried in the books, said in a singsong voice, "So, the weather was so nice that you had a tryst in the flower garden?"

"It wasn't a tryst. We were just chatting," he replied. "She told me about this ghost ship named the Queen Berry—Wait." He scuttled back and peered at Victorique. "How do you know that? Were you watching?"

"No."

"Then how?"

"The same way I always do." Reading a book, she added, languidly, "The Fountain of Wisdom told me so."

While Kazuya waited patiently for her next words, Victorique smoked a puff. "Kujou, you are both methodical and overly-serious," she said in a casual tone.

"...Well, *sorry* about that."

"Someone like you would wear the school cap when going outdoors. I can see the mark of the cap in your hair. On your collar is a pink petal from the pansies on the garden. So one can reasonably conclude that you were there."

"But you said a tryst. I could've been alone."

"You're chirpy today. Your footsteps as you climbed the stairs sounded jolly."

"What...?"

Really? Kazuya inclined his head. *I'm sure I climbed like usual, careful and precise, with my back straight.*

“You are uncharacteristically vigorous in your responses. There’s only one reason for a male of the human species to be so jovial. Lust. Kujou, you’re aroused and in incredibly high spirits, which is unlike you. You wouldn’t be aroused if you were alone. So you were with a woman, and it must have been someone you fancy. That is what the Fountain of Wisdom told me.”

“Come on, now. Lust? Can’t you be a little more subtle? And what do you mean it’s unlike me?”

Turning red, Kazuya slumped down, holding his knees.

Victorique always guessed exactly what Kazuya did that day without even seeing him, but today was especially embarrassing.

Hugging his knees, he stared at Victorique’s face bitterly. “You never fail to amaze...”

Victorique was silent for a while as she went on reading. When Kazuya’s words finally seemed to reach her brain, she nodded. “Yes, about that. My heightened senses gather fragments of chaos from the world around me. The Fountain of Wisdom then toys with them to stave off my boredom, reconstructing them. If I feel like it, I may even verbalize them so that the average person, like you, can understand. Oftentimes, though, I can’t be bothered, so I keep quiet.”

“...Why can’t you keep quiet when *I’m* around?”

“I think it’s because whenever I see you, I get the urge to poke fun at you.” She then fell quiet. Her head sank deeper and deeper into her books.

Kazuya sighed and stared at her face. Normally, he would never allow anyone to call him, a brilliant man representing his country, *average*. However, when Victorique, the mysterious noble girl who never attended class said it, he would become speechless.

As a matter of fact, Kazuya didn’t know much about Victorique’s background and what kind of a girl she was.

She was very beautiful, very small, very smart, and very unapproachable. Given a masculine name for reasons unknown, she was a little crazy, but she could very well be a mad genius.

According to some well-informed people, she was an illegitimate daughter of a noble. Apparently, her family feared her so they sent her to

this school because they didn't want her staying in the house. Her mother was a famous dancer who went crazy. She was the reincarnation of the legendary gray wolf, and she was seen devouring raw meat. As one would expect from a school that loved supernatural stories, things grew weirder and more dubious.

Kazuya had never asked such questions to Victorique. As the son of an imperial soldier, looking at people with such vile curiosity was unacceptable, and more than that, Victorique herself was so odd that he didn't even know what to ask her.

Despite that, he climbed all the way up here only to feel irritated at her sharp tongue. Such was Kazuya's current daily routine.

"By the way, Victorique," Kazuya said, trying to keep his spirits up. "You read tons of books every day."

Victorique didn't reply, and instead gave a small nod.

"Are you planning to read all the books in this library?" he asked in a joking tone.

Victorique raised her head and pointed down from the railing. "I'm almost done reading the books on this side. Hmm? It looks like your eyeballs are about to pop out of your head, Kujou. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I was just... shocked. What are you reading right now?"

"A lot of things." Victorique yawned as she stretched like a cat. "Ah, I'm bored. There is not enough chaos to be reconstructed. I read and read, but it's not enough."

"I think my brain would break down if I read one of these." Kazuya pointed to a Latin book spread open in front of him.

Victorique's face lit up. "I know. I'll explain it to you."

"Explain what?"

"What this book is about. You see, this book is about ancient divination."

"Divination? Not interested."

"I don't care."

"Why tell me about it, then?" Kazuya looked like he wanted out of there.

"Because I'm bored." Victorique nodded, as if her answer made perfect sense.

She forced him to stay and listen. “According to this book, divination is a practice that has existed side by side with human desire since ancient times. For example, in the ancient Roman Empire, they burned animal intestines and scapula and used the cracks produced to tell their fortunes. This practice lasted until the 11th century, when it was banned by a Christian ecumenical council. Bibliomancy, which involves opening a book and reading what is written on its pages, has also been practiced since ancient times. People back then used the books of Homer, but the Christians began using the Bible. This was also banned by a council... Hey, Kujou, wake up. I will die of boredom.”

“...Sorry.”

“So divination is a heretical practice. But people continue to do it even when it is banned by the government and by the Church. In some cases, clergymen continued practicing it secretly for centuries. Do you know why?”

“No idea...”

Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth and exhaled a puff of smoke. “Because they come true.”

“...No way.”

“Valens, an emperor of the ancient Roman Empire, felt insecure about his position. So he summoned a soothsayer to tell him the name of the person who would threaten him. The soothsayer drew letters of their alphabet on a flat piece of land, placed some food, and released a chicken. The chicken ate the food around the letters “T”, “H”, “E”, “O” and “D”. The emperor interpreted this as the name Theodoreus and executed all those who bore that name in the empire. But the name of the next emperor was Theodosius. He had the wrong name.”

“...Well, that’s a disturbing story.”

“Listen seriously. I might fall asleep from boredom.”

“Sorry.”

“From what I’ve been able to gather from various sources, the most credible method is called the Magic Mirror. This mirror, depicted in Leonardo da Vinci’s work ‘Witch Using a Magic Mirror’, is the forerunner of crystal divination. A silver jar filled with wine, a copper jar filled with oil, and a glass jar filled with water are prepared. The divination is done over three days and three nights. The copper jar shows the past, the glass

the present, and the silver jar the future. All are displayed on said magic mirror.”

On one of the pages of the book Victorique held out to him, there was an illustration of a woman with a red cloth over her head, holding up a golden hand mirror in front of three jars. A group of men garbed in white were prostrating themselves, rubbing their foreheads on the ground.

Flipping through the pages, Victorique rambled on. Kazuya listened quietly as he didn’t want her to get mad at him.

When he thought about it, back in his country, women always followed quietly three steps behind. He had not trained himself to deal with this type of girl who walked three steps ahead and then turned around and said, “Hurry up!”

Gotta think of it as training, Kazuya thought. Training is always hard work. Man, I’m sleepy.

“Now, it is also interesting to note the account of rhabdomancy, divination using sticks, by the prophet Moses in the Book of Numbers. In order to know from which tribe the future leader of the Israelites would be born, he prepared twelve sticks with the name of each tribe on them.”

“...I see. I gotta say, I didn’t expect this,” Kazuya said.

“Expect what?”

“That you believe in divinations.”

“Of course I don’t believe in them.”

“What?”

Victorique pulled out another book from the pile around her. She opened it up and showed it to Kazuya, but the book, which was written in difficult German, made him wince and shrink back. Victorique’s small hand reached out and pinned Kazuya down, forcing him to give in.

“...What’s that book about?” he asked.

“Psychology. Let me explain it to you, you thickheaded, mediocre egghead. Why do people believe in divination?”

“Go on...”

“Because they come true. Not as an objective fact, of course. It’s only subjective. In other words, they *think* it comes true. That is the inherit power that divination has had since before the era of Christ. You see, divination is supported by the group psychology of ‘wanting something to

come true'. It's the same as the supernatural story boom that is rampant in this school. Everyone is unconsciously an accomplice."

"Ahuh..."

"Let us list three possible causes. First: only divinations that come true are recorded in history. Behind one correct prediction are countless incorrect ones. Second is the soothsayer's skill of guessing what the person wants by reading their facial expression. And third is when they give answers that can be interpreted in more ways than one."

"Hmm..."

"For example, Kujou, let's say that before you came to this country to study, you had your fortune told. If it was a good fortune and you got good grades, you'd think that it came true. If you got a bad fortune and you had a tough time, you would also think that the fortune was right."

"Hmm..."

"Emperor Valens' case is the same. The five letters that the chicken chose should have had countless combinations. But he already suspected a young man named Theodoreus. So he linked the result of the divination to the name. In other words, divination is superstition that is backed by the psychology of 'asking for a push' for something that you have already decided to do. In other words, it is a means to avoid responsibility... Argh!" Suddenly, she clutched her head with both hands and groaned.

"Wh-Wh-What?!" Kazuya jumped to his feet. He thought she had finally gone mad.

Victorique shot him a glare. "Explaining it to an average person made me even more bored."

"Now that's just rude."

"My chest hurts... The boredom is killing me. I blame you. How will you make it up to me?"

"Why me?!" Suddenly, Kazuya remembered something. "I know. Speaking of divinations..."

He recalled the case that Ms. Cecile told him about.

An old lady was killed under strange circumstances in a nearby village. She was shot dead in a locked room and no murder weapon was found. The victim was a person named Roxane and she was a...

"A fortune teller was killed in a nearby village yesterday," he said.

Victorique's small shoulders twitched. She lifted her head, and for the first time today, she stared straight at Kazuya.

Blonde hair that glittered like golden threads cascading down the floor in soft waves. Skin so white that you could almost make out the veins beneath. A pair of emerald eyes, melancholic, like a man that had lived too long, shooting him a distant gaze.

Kazuya shrank back.

Victorique opened her mouth softly. "...Chaos," she murmured, blowing a puff of smoke in his face.

Coughing, he wiped the tears from his eyes. "I don't know the exact details, though." He sat down next to Victorique. "Ms. Cecile told me about it earlier. She only knows what the cops told her and some gossips from the neighborhood. So anyway, the old lady bought a small and cozy house and started living there around the start of the world war."

Roxane the fortune-teller.

A wrinkly old woman, rumored to be 80 to 90 years old, lived in the house with her Indian servant and Arabian maid. Last night, when her granddaughter came to visit her, she was killed.

"Hold on a minute. Why did she have an Indian servant and an Arabian maid?" Victorique asked.

"Apparently, she liked exotic servants. She was a knowledgeable old lady, and she could speak conversational Hindi and Arabic. Oh, the maid only understands Arabic, but the servant is fluent in English and French."

Roxane was shot dead in her room that night. The bullet pierced her left eye and killed her instantly.

Who did it was unknown. People who were in the house that night—the servant, the maid, and the granddaughter—were all suspected of the crime, but the investigation was not going well.

"Why is that?" Victorique asked.

"Well, I think the door and windows were locked from the inside, and they couldn't find the murder weapon, a gun. All three of them denied killing her."

"Hmm..." Victorique looked at Kazuya, urging him to continue.

He squirmed under her gaze. That was all the information he got from his conversation with Ms. Cecile. Besides, even the teacher didn't seem to

know anything more than that. He couldn't give Victorique any more information even if he wanted to.

Suddenly, footsteps came from the entrance of the library. Kazuya looked down the railing and spotted Grevil de Blois, the great inspector that Ms. Cecile was talking about, entering gallantly.

Him again...

Kazuya poked Victorique on the shoulder. "You can ask the guy with the weird hairdo for the rest."

"...Hmm?" Victorique's face turned a little grim.

Inspector Blois stepped into the elevator. The metal cage clanged as it rose up.

Two young men wearing hunting caps—the inspector's men—skipped into the library, holding hands, and waited downstairs. They looked up, waving their free hands.

They worked at the local police station, the same station that forcibly appointed Grevil de Blois, a young male aristocrat with a penchant for crimes, as an inspector. Grevil always dragged them along in his investigations.

As Kazuya pulled his eyes away from the men, the elevator arrived with a loud clang. Inspector Blois stepped out onto a small hall in front of the garden.

A strange-looking man was standing beyond the lush greenery and the soft light pouring from the skylight.

He wore a three-piece suit with a fancy ascot tie. A pair of fine silver cuffs gleamed on his wrist. He was the picture of a fashionable man. But there was something off about him.

His hairstyle. For some reason, he had his thick, blonde hair into the shape of a drill. It could very well be used as a weapon.

Arms folded, he leaned against the door frame at an angle, and spoke. "Hey there, Kujou!"

"...Hello."

Inspector Blois approached the boy. He didn't spare glance at Victorique. Victorique herself was looking the other way, smoking her pipe.

"I once used my brilliant mind to save your life," the inspector said.

"Ah, that was a tough case. Takes me back..."

"I seem to recall Victorique solving it, though."

“I thought I’d talk to you about a case. For some reason, when I tell you about a case, the mind of this great inspector clears up.”

Kazuya was once a suspect in a murder case he happened upon on his way to school, and was almost arrested by Inspector Blois. The one who saved him while he wondered whether he would be deported or tried for murder was a mysterious beautiful girl he met in this garden, Victorique.

Of course, Victorique didn’t help Kazuya out of concern. Her Fountain of Wisdom determined the case to be fragments of chaos that needed to be reconstructed, so she ascertained the truth. In fact, even after explaining her reasoning, she didn’t use it as a basis to insist on his innocence. Kazuya explained Victorique’s deduction on his own to the inspector and cleared his name.

The memory still made him shudder.

Since then, Inspector Blois, having gotten a taste for it, visited the garden whenever he came across a difficult case. While he told Kazuya the details, Victorique would listen and reconstruct the fragments of chaos. He would then go back down and solve the case.

In other words, he was not a great inspector or anything. He was simply counting on a human cheat sheet for help.

“Just talk to Victorique, Inspector. I wouldn’t understand a thing anyway.”

“What? There’s only the two of us here.”

Appalled, Kazuya glanced back and forth between the two.

Apparently, Victorique and Inspector Blois knew each other since before the first case. However, both of them never made eye contact with each other, and the inspector seemed to resent the fact that he had to ask Victorique for help. He could just not come to her, but apparently he had his reasons.

Victorique lifted her head. “Go ahead, Kujou. I will read, and you two can keep talking. I might talk to myself sometimes, but don’t worry about it. If what I say turned out to be a hint, it’s none of my business.”

“Uh, I don’t think that’s a good idea...”

“All right, let’s talk.” Inspector Blois rolled up his sleeves. “Hey, look at me.”

Kazuya gave up and decided to listen.

Inspector Blois drew out a pipe from his pocket and put it into his mouth in the most imperious manner possible. Kazuya watched as white smoke rose from his mouth and pip and disappeared into his drill-shaped hair.

Victorique was still facing the other way, smoking a pipe herself.

After exhaling a puff of smoke, the inspector spoke. “A fortune-teller named Roxane was murdered last night. The people in the mansion had finished dinner and were unwinding on their own. The fortune-teller was resting in her room, which was located on the first floor. The manservant said he was outside her room, returning the hares back to their shed.”

“...Hares?” Victorique asked.

Inspector Blois gave a jerk, then nodded toward Kazuya. “This fortune-teller kept several hares and one hound. Sometimes she would set the hares loose and let the hound kill them. I don’t know why, but apparently there are two kinds of hares, one is killed and the other is raised with care and live a full life. I don’t know the criteria for classifying them, though. She was a strange lady, apparently.”

“I see.” Victorique said.

Even though they were practically having a conversation, they didn’t look at each other’s faces. Kazuya was stuck in the middle—not that it was anything new, of course.

“The maid was in the next room, cleaning. Her granddaughter was upstairs, dancing with a record playing loudly. After hearing a gunshot, everyone gathered in the hallway of the house. Worried about the fortune-teller, the maid knocked on the door and called out to her, but there was no answer. The door was locked. The manservant panicked and suggested breaking down the door with an axe. The door was made of a light, thin material that could easily be opened and closed by an old lady in a wheelchair, so he thought a swing of the axe should do the trick. But the granddaughter objected firmly. She said she didn’t want anything destroyed because the house would be hers after her grandmother’s death. An outrageous thing to say, if you ask me. The manservant backed down, but the maid, who was a foreigner and didn’t understand what the granddaughter was saying, brought a self-defense gun from the next room and shot the lock of the door before anyone could stop her. Enraged, the granddaughter lunged at the maid, and the two women got into a scuffle. In the meantime, the Indian servant entered the room by himself. Then,

according to him, the fortune-teller was lying on the floor near her wheelchair. She had been shot through her left eye and died instantly. The window was also locked from the inside. The murder weapon was not found.”

“Hmm.”

“I have absolutely no clue what happened.”

“Huh. I see,” Victorique said. She gave a big yawn, looking extremely bored, and stretched out her slender arms like a lazy cat. And then another yawn.

Inspector Blois stared at Victorique’s face with burning hatred, then turned his eyes away. “Well, I know who did it, though,” he said. “The servant who was outside the room is very suspicious. But I don’t have any evidence...”

“The maid is your culprit, Grevil,” Victorique mumbled in the middle of a yawn.

The inspector froze and looked at Victorique in shock, but quickly pulled his eyes away and turned back to Kazuya.

“What do you mean by that?!”

“How should I know?! Stop shaking me!”

“The maid can only speak Arabic,” Victorique said in a low voice. “And only the fortune-teller could understand her.”

“Huh...”

Kazuya and Inspector Blois turned their heads to Victorique, the latter still holding the former’s shoulder.

“What do you mean, Victorique?” Kazuya asked.

“Elementary. I wouldn’t even call it a fragment of chaos. Listen carefully. The maid knocked on the door and shouted in Arabic. There was no answer, so she went to get a gun from the next room. She then shot the lock on the door to destroy it.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Only the fortune-teller and the maid herself knew what she said exactly.”

Kazuya turned to face Victorique. “What did she say, then?”

“Something like this, perhaps. Though I don’t know which of the two she made the bad guy, the granddaughter or the manservant. ‘Your life is in

danger. You heard the gunshot just now, didn't you? Get away from the window and come near the door. I'll help you."

Kazuya and the inspector shared looks.

"What? Not sure I follow... Hmm..."

While the inspector mulled things over, Kazuya spoke. "So... the fortune-teller was still alive then?"

"Of course." Victorique nodded firmly.

She was about to bury herself in her books once more when she raised her head, noticing something.

Kazuya and the inspector were staring at her with puzzled looks. Sunlight streaming from the skylight shone on their heads. Tree branches and Inspector Blois' hair swayed as a gentle breeze blew past.

After a moment of silence, Victorique yawned loudly. Realizing that none of them understood what she was getting at, she wearily added, "Do I need to explain more?"



“Yes. *More*, more,” Kazuya said. “Please, Victorique.”

“In short, it wasn’t the first shot that killed the fortune-teller. That one was meant to mislead. The maid shot and killed her in front of witnesses. She tricked the fortune-teller by telling her to move closer to the door for her safety, and shot her together with the door lock. The bullet hit her left eye because she was probably trying to peep through the keyhole. But it was the gun’s muzzle that was on the other side.”

“Wait a minute...” Grevil said. “What about the first shot, then? I mean, Kujou.”

“I’m not the one making the deduction. It’s Victorique.”

“The first gunshot...” Victorique yawned once more. “...came from the next room. She did it to frighten the fortune-teller and gather the people in the house. I don’t know where she was shooting at, though. Check the next room. I’m sure you’ll find a fresh bullet hole.”

“...I see.” Inspector Blois stood up.

As if nothing had happened, he pulled and adjusted the cuffs of his three-piece suit, fixed his drill-shaped hair with his hand, and scurried toward the elevator, as though running away from something.

Furious, Kazuya called to him. “Inspector!”

“...What?” He turned around.

“No ‘thank you’ to Victorique? She just helped you with your investigation.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

His face was the very picture of arrogance. Raising his chin and squaring his shoulders, he stared straight at Kazuya. Slowly, he took the pipe out of his mouth and blew a puff of smoke to the boy’s face.

Kazuya coughed.

“Kujou, I simply came here to check how the Asian boy I saved is doing,” the inspector said as he walked away. “I’m glad to see you doing well. Ah, but such strange things coming out of your mouth.”

“...Grevil,” Victorique called softly, raising her head.

Already inside the elevator, Inspector Blois turned around with an anxious look on his face. He stared fearfully at the tiny Victorique as if he were looking at something mighty and powerful.

It was a bizarre sight, as if the role of adult and child had switched.

Kazuya quietly glanced at them both.

“The mystery behind the killer’s motive should be hidden in what she shot first.”

“...What are you talking about?!”

“Figure that one out yourself, Grevil.”

Clang.

The elevator started to move. Inspector Blois’ handsome face twisted in frustration. The metal cage descended, taking him back to ground.

Yawning, Victorique lay down on the floor like a cat and began rolling around.

“It was over in an instant,” she grumbled. “The boredom is back. Ah...”

“Hey, Victorique.” Kazuya said, clearly upset. Victorique, of course, did not care about his mood one bit. She just kept rolling around over the books. “That inspector with the weird hairdo will probably take all the credit again. Even though he gets help from you all the time.”

“Does it bother you?” she asked.

He nodded firmly. “I hate unfairness. Besides, he’s got a nasty attitude for someone asking for help.”

Victorique was still rolling on the floor, seemingly uninterested.

“Oh, by the way,” Kazuya added. “Do you two know each other? You don’t seem to get along very well...”

She didn’t answer. He gave up, heaving a sigh.

Abruptly, she jolted up. “Dance for me, Kujou.”

“...What?!”

“Stop sitting around and get up. Then dance. Right now.”

“Why?!”

“To stave off my boredom,” she said with a nod, as if it was the most obvious thing.

“No. I’m leaving! Uhm, afternoon classes are about to start, so...”

“Kujou.”

Green eyes bore at him, freezing him in place. He felt like a frog under a snake’s stare. She blew smoke on his face, and he coughed again.

“Oh, come on!”

“Hurry up, Kujou.” Her glassy eyes were fastened on him. “Dance.”

“...Yes, ma’am.”

Digging into his memories, Kazuya began doing a dance that people did during summer festivals in his hometown. As the son of a military family,

he had never been one to dance, sing, or do anything frivolous.

“Hmm. What kind of a dance is that?”

“It’s called the Bon-Odori. Wanna try it?”

“Absolutely not. Ah, so bored.”

“You’re so mean, you know that?”

“I think I’ll take a nap...”

Victorique’s sigh echoed throughout the garden.

The next morning.

In his room at the St. Marguerite Academy boys’ dormitory, Kazuya woke up at exactly 7:30 as he always did. He cast a glance at the boys tottering in the hallway and the washroom, washed his face, brushed his hair, and sat down at his usual seat in the cafeteria.

The sexy, red-haired dorm mother put breakfast on the table. As he was about to dig into his breakfast of bread, milk, and fruit, he let out a yelp.

The dorm mother, sitting cross-legged on a chair in the corner and reading the morning paper with a cigarette in her mouth, lifted her head in surprise.

“What’s wrong?! Was there something in the food?!”

“Uh, no. The food’s great. No, wait. That headline!”

The dorm mother handed Kazuya the newspaper, and he immediately started reading it.

The headline read: **He Does it Again! The Great Inspector Blois Solves the Murder of Roxane the Fortune-Teller!!**

As always, Inspector Blois had taken credit for Victorique’s deductions. The article went on to say that the Arabian maid had been arrested, that she was very beautiful, and that this was partly why the inspector was so eager to question her.

The granddaughter, inheritor of the fortune-teller’s estate—the scary lady who grappled with the maid—gave Inspector Blois a passionate kiss—not that that mattered—and a luxurious yacht as a token of her gratitude.

“What?!”

The inspector laughed out loud as he said he was going to go sailing this weekend right away.

“A yacht?!”

Kazuya returned the morning paper to the dorm mother and sat back in his chair.

He pondered over the matter for a couple of seconds.

Victorique should be the one receiving the kiss and the yacht. Wrongs should be called out. Damn that drill-headed inspector!

Kazuya stood up.

“Victorique!!”

Kazuya rushed to St. Marguerite’s library first thing in the morning and ran up the narrow set of stairs, only to find himself in a deserted garden. He checked his watch. It was still before eight. He thought Victorique would be arriving soon.

He spent another several minutes going back down the stairs. As he was descending, he saw the elevator climbing up. A faculty member must have boarded it.

As he ran out of the library, he bumped into a student on the way to school.

“Kyaaa?!”

“S-Sorry... Oh, Avril.”

A British girl with short, blonde hair and long, smooth legs was standing there. A photo fell from her hand, so Kazuya bent down to pick it up.

It was a picture of a young man. He was looking straight at the camera, wearing a faint smile. He had dazzling features and a refreshing charm that could mesmerize anyone.

Kazuya let out a small sigh. “Morning, Avril. Who’s this? Your boyfriend?”

Avril laughed. “Come on now, Kujou. Of course not!” She tapped Kazuya on the back.

“Ow, ow, ow...”

It was quite painful. *I guess girls are stronger than I thought.*

“This is Sir Ned,” she said.

“Sir who?”

“You don’t know him? It’s Sir Ned Baxter. He’s an English stage actor, and he’s very popular. You’d think it’s just because he’s gorgeous, but he actually has great acting skills.”

“Oh... so you’re a fan?”

Avril shook her head. “A friend from England gave it to me, so I just keep it safe.”

“I see...”

Avril tucked the photo carefully into her pocket. “See you in class!”

“O-Okay.”

“Wanna talk about scary stuff again?”

“Uh... I’ll tell the story this time.”

“You will? But you’re a scaredy-cat.”

Kazuya felt offended, but Avril didn’t seem to notice. She waved as she hurried away.

Me? A scaredy-cat?

After regaining his composure, Kazuya also bolted away.

He left the campus and headed for the village. He entered the local police station on the main street, where people, carriages, and nowadays cars bustled about.

Vines covered the walls of the small, brick building. It was so old that it looked like it would collapse at any moment. The glass door of the main entrance was cracked here and there, and several turquoise tiles on the floor were also broken.

Inspector Grevil de Blois, who was seated in the largest room on the third floor—a room more splendid than the chief of police’s, as one would expect from the son of a noble—looked up in surprise when he saw Kazuya. The boy forced his way in despite being stopped by the inspector’s two subordinates.

Expensive western-style dolls filled the shelves that lined all four walls of the room. A bizarre sight in a police station, it showed what kind of hobby the inspector had.

“Hello there, Kujou.”

“Y-You nincompoop!”

“Huh?”

Men from the station gathered around, wondering what the ruckus was about. They watched with great interest as the famous inspector and the Asian boy stared each other down, while the two subordinates blocked the way.

“I read this morning’s paper,” Kazuya said. “What was that about?!”

“Uh, well...” Inspector Blois rushed to make up excuses. “I didn’t ask for the kiss. She just did it on her own. Plus, she was quite old, so it didn’t really make me happy or anything...”

“Not the kiss!”

“Huh?”

“The luxury yacht! And the gratitude from the family. Those were not meant for you. They were meant for Victo—”

Right when Kazuya was about to mention Victorique’s name, the inspector made a long leap towards him. He covered the boy’s mouth and glared at him with bloodshot eyes, as if to tell him to shut up.

The onlookers strained their ears. The inspector, his arms wrapped around Kazuya’s neck and mouth, moved slowly, stretched his leg out, and kicked the door shut.

Finally, he removed his hand from Kazuya’s mouth.

“Keep your mouth shut. You’ll expose me.”

“How could you?!”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. Fine, fine. You’re one persistent man. You win.”

“What now...?”

“My plan this weekend was to enjoy nature to my heart’s content alone, with the theme ‘man and sea’. But no matter. You’re all invited.”

The inspector gave an exaggerated sigh. As he sat down on the desk, he held one of the dolls on the shelf to his chest and stroked its long hair lovingly. Kazuya looked at him like he was looking at a weirdo.

Not minding the boy’s gaze, the inspector muttered, “She’s...”

“Who?”

“I mean Victorique. I’m sure I can convince them to give her special permission to go out. After all, I’m Inspector Grevil de Blois. I’ll try my best.”

Kazuya cocked his head. “Special permission?”

“It’s nothing. So, see you this weekend. I’ll give you the details later.”

He grabbed the doll’s hand and used it to wave goodbye at Kazuya. Creeped out, the boy hurried out of the room.

St. Marguerite Grand Library.

When Kazuya came running up the maze of stairs again, Victorique was already in the garden, smoking a pipe like always.

“So, you made an appointment for this weekend,” Victorique said without looking up.

Difficult books were spread out around her. Her long, blonde hair cascaded down like an untied turban as she immersed herself in her reading.

The fact that she could flip through the pages while listening to Kazuya indicated that she was able to read difficult books and have a conversation at the same time.

“Yup,” Kazuya answered.

“With Grevil?”

Kazuya puffed out his chest. “I couldn’t claim ownership of the yacht, but we can count this as a win for now.”

Victorique lifted her head slowly and looked at him with disbelief. He was burning with rage and feeling elated at his victory.

Melancholic, green eyes, like an old-timer who had lived too long. A raspy, yet clear voice.

“Let me ask you something,” she said.

“What is it?”

“Do you like Grevil?”

“Of course not! I *hate* him. He makes me sick!”

“One more question. Do you enjoy spending your precious weekend with the person you hate?”

“No! Oh...” After a few moments of stunned silence, Kazuya slumped down on the spot, his head thrown back. “How did this happen?”

“I would like to ask you the same. But I see...”

Not paying any attention to Kazuya, Victorique looked up from her books and smoked her pipe idly.

Her porcelain skin glowed under the soft light shining in through the skylight.

“I can leave this prison... Grevil said he would get me special permission!”

Kazuya did not notice her cryptic mumbling.

“A weekend out with the inspector... How did it come to this? No, wait. He’s probably just as bummed as I am, so it’s even. I wish he’d at least do something about that hairdo. I don’t wanna be seen walking with him with that thing on his head.”

He realized Victorique was on her feet. Standing about a hundred and forty centimeters tall, she had long, blond hair that hung down, radiant white skin, and emerald green eyes. She looked more like an intricate, mobile doll than a human being.

Kazuya also stood up.

Rarely did he see Victorique on her feet. Her small size surprised him once again. He was small for a boy, but there was a small golden head around his chest. Lifting her head back like a child, Victorique looked up at him.

“I’ll go get ready.”

“What? There’s still a few days until the weekend.”

Victorique looked miffed, then began walking in silence.

She pressed the button for the staff elevator and entered the steel cage.

“Whaaat?!”

“What’s wrong, Kujou?” She turned around.

“Why are you taking the elevator?”

Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth. “Because I have permission. This is an elevator for staff and me. What’s wrong? You look like you’re on the verge of tears.”

“I assumed you climbed the stairs like me... I thought we both went through the same struggle.”

“Ridiculous. You’re the only moron who would waste time going up these stairs. Speaking of which...” She gave a distant look. “This morning, when I came up in the elevator, I saw you on the stairs. I didn’t call you, though, because you looked like you were in a hurry.”

“You should’ve called me! I was here to see you!”

The metal door closed.

“Let me in!” Kazuya cried.

“No can do. This is for me and staff only. You use the stairs. Drag your legs painfully up and down. It’s valuable exercise for you who do nothing but study. Gain some stamina.”

Kazuya couldn’t say anything back. Back in his country, his two older brothers not only excelled in their studies but were also physically fit. So whenever his family told him to run or do push-ups, he would run around the neighborhood. But he hadn’t done any exercise since he came to Sauville. His older brothers were big and strong, and they used to beat up brats in the neighborhood. As they grew older, the eldest brother, a brawler, became a scholar, while the other one, a fast runner, became a politician. Hard to say whether they were the right people for the jobs.

As Kazuya stood there with a distant look in his eyes, Victorique gave him a mocking smile and waved her tiny hand.

“Adios, my friend. I will see you downstairs.”

“Huh? Hey, Victorique!”

Clang.

Cruelly, the steel cage began descending, carrying only Victorique.

Time passed and weekend came.

Overcast skies covered the quiet grounds of St. Marguerite Academy.

In a corner of the campus located halfway up rolling mountains stood the student dormitory, a place where the children of nobility resided. A two-story building made of fine oak wood, silk curtains swayed in the windows of each room. Inside were spacious private chambers for each student, and a large dining hall with glittering chandeliers.

In front of the dormitory, Kazuya and Victorique were arguing.

“Why is there so much stuff?!” Kazuya said. “This is just weird.”

“My brilliant mind has determined this as being, uhm, the absolute minimum luggage necessary... for the trip.”

She didn’t sound so sure.

Face red, Kazuya pointed to the travel bag on the ground that looked to be twice her size.

“Why do you need so much stuff for an overnight trip on a yacht? It looks like you’re running away from home. This bag’s big enough to hold both of us inside.”

“If I say it’s necessary, it’s necessary!” Victorique repeated stubbornly.

Kazuya was not to be outdone. “Why do you have more luggage than I did when I came here? I crossed the ocean all the way from the Orient. I think I was onboard a ship for like a month. By the way, can you carry all of this by yourself?”

“Of course I can’t.”

“So...”

“You will carry it.”

“Are you stupid?!”

Kazuya opened the huge travel bag and began inspecting its contents.

“You can’t just touch my things!” she protested. “My privacy...”

But no one could stop him at this point. Ms. Cecile, who was passing by, stared at the two of them with surprise.

“You two always get along so well,” the teacher said. “But what are you doing?”

“Great timing, Teach. Here.”

Kazuya tossed something to Ms. Cecile. The teacher caught it with a bewildered look.

Victorique looked downcast. “That’s my compass...”

“The yacht should have one already. Oh, and you don’t need this life vest. And this pile of clothes... you only need one change of clothes. Uh, why is there a utensil set here?! And a chair?! What are you, a refugee?!”

In the end, the luggage was reduced to one bag that the small Victorique could carry over her shoulder, and the two of them were able to depart without much problem. They left the huge bag with Ms. Cecile and started walking toward the village.

“Kujou, you are one bossy man,” Victorique said in exasperation.

“No, I’m not.”

“They say that traveling together can reveal surprising flaws between even the closest friends, creating a crack in their relationship.”

“What are you talking about? Oh, we should run. The plan’s to take the 54-minute train.”

They hurried to the only station in the village. It was a small station, marked by a round clock on the triangular roof. Whenever a train arrived, the small building shook.

Kazuya bought a ticket and was about to go through the ticket gate, but Victorique just stared at him blankly.

“Victorique, do you have a ticket?”

“...A ticket?”

“You buy one here. Take out your wallet.”

Seeing the wallet full of bills, Kazuya quickly told her to put it away. He bought a ticket for her, then hurried to the platform, pulling her by the hand.

Like two rats scurrying across a kitchen floor, they dashed through the crowd of adults getting ready to travel. The train they were supposed to take was in the middle of the platform, just starting to move. Kazuya turned and pulled on Victorique’s hand. She was running as fast as she could, her golden hair bobbing in the air. Kazuya lifted her up onto the train, then boarded after.

The train gained speed and roared past the platform of the small station building.

Victorique's golden hair puffed up like cotton candy as the wind blew. She was standing still near the door, gripping the railing. Her emerald green eyes widened in surprise.

The train gradually accelerated.

People dotted the vineyard sprawled along the village. Eventually, the train was moving too fast to make them out.

Kazuya motioned her to their seats, and Victorique quietly followed.

They got to a box seat and sat facing each other. After settling down, Kazuya yelled.

"Why do you have so much money with you?!"

"I need it."

"You don't need that much! Besides, if people see a purse like that, pickpockets will be all over you. You really scared me back there. Hmm, Victorique?"

Victorique put both her small hands on the window frame like a child and stared at the scenery outside.

Gingerly, Kazuya peered into her face.

He was worried that he might have made her mad since he'd done nothing but give her a piece of his mind since morning, but Victorique didn't seem offended. She just looked out the window with her green eyes wide open.

Lush greenery. Majestic mountains.

Gradually, the scenery turned into an urban cityscape with more buildings and roads.

They were descending down the mountain where the academy was located and approaching the city. Victorique was staring at the scenery ecstatically.

From time to time, her gaze flitted to rocking vehicles and chimneys billowing black smoke.

She looks like she's never rode a train before.

Kazuya quietly regarded Victorique's face as she stared out the window.

The station they were headed to was located in a bustling city along the Mediterranean Sea. A large port city, it was so full of life compared to the

village at the foot of the Alps that it was hard to believe it was the same country. The faint smell of the sea wafted even to the station.

Kazuya disembarked on the platform along with Victorique. Unlike the station in the village, there were several platforms here, and the ceiling was incredibly high. They had to be careful, or they'd get lost in the station.

Seasoned travelers passed by, and porters in a red uniform carrying large pieces of luggage rushed across the station.

Countless people made their way to the platforms, and countless also disembarked. An urban station, where people converged endlessly. There were few children. People passing by occasionally cast curious glances at Kazuya and Victorique.

After alighting on the platform, Victorique kept looking around. When Kazuya finally found the ticket gate, he tried to walk there with her, but he had a hard time because she frequently headed somewhere else. He decided to hold Victorique's hand tight.

It was a tiny hand. He felt like he had his little sister with him, not a classmate.

"Stay close to me, Victorique."

"..."

She kept looking around. Whenever she saw something unusual, she would ask.

"What's that?"

"An ice cream stand."

"And that?"

"A newspaper stand. Walk straight ahead. You'll get run over."

Kazuya wrapped his arms around Victorique and walked out onto the street.

The wide street was divided into several lanes, where carriages and cars streamed past nonstop. The sidewalk was full of people, weaving through traffic with familiar steps, hailing carriages and entering them. Dazzling stores lined the sidewalks, their windows adorned with fine confectionery, beautiful dresses, hats, folding fans.

There was a faint smell of the tide in the air. The sea was close.

Kazuya stopped and whistled. A four-wheeled carriage clattered towards them and pulled over.

"Was that magic?" Victorique asked, startled.

“It’s how you hail a ride. Come on, get in.”

Even after boarding the carriage, Victorique kept her gaze outside, observing the people and buildings curiously.

After telling the driver their destination, Kazuya said, “I take it you don’t go out often?”

Victorique did not answer. Kazuya thought she looked upset, so he didn’t pry deeper.

By the time they arrived at the coast of the Bay of Lyon where they were to meet the inspector, Kazuya was completely exhausted.

Luxury yachts belonging to the aristocracy and the rich, as well as cruise ships with exotic designs, were docked in a corner of a large wharf facing the Mediterranean Sea. Sailors of various skin colors boarded and disembarked.

A young man was standing on top of a shiny yacht moored to the jetty.

He wore a striped sailor shirt and white, tight-fitting trousers. A red bandana was wrapped around his neck, and his head was still as pointy as always. It was none other than Inspector Grevil de Blois.

The inspector caught sight of them and waved. “Ahoy there, matey!”

Exhausted, Kazuya waved back wearily.

Inspector Blois nimbly jumped off, and struck a sensational pose before Kazuya and Victorique, his one foot in front of the other.

“Ah, it’s been bugging me,” he said suddenly, seemingly devastated. “Why am I spending my weekend with you guys?”

“I was wondering the same thing,” Kazuya replied. “Nice yacht.”

“I call it *the Blois*. By the way, Kujou.” The inspector’s face suddenly turned serious.

He stooped lower so Victorique could also hear him—there was at least a forty-centimeter difference in height between them—and whispered.

“About the case... The first shot in the next room...”

“There you go again, trying to take advantage of Victorique...”

Kazuya felt his anger flare, but Victorique gave him a nudge, telling him to stop. Her face said she wanted to hear the details, so he begrudgingly kept quiet.

“A mirror was shot. Shattered to pieces. Apparently, it was an antique mirror that Lady Roxane used in her divinations.”

“A magic mirror,” Victorique murmured.

Inspector Blois shuddered. “There were many divination tools in the room. Like—”

“A silver jar filled with wine, a copper jar filled with oil, and a glass jar filled with water.”

The Inspector looked at Victorique with frightened eyes.

Victorique shrugged. “They’re tools for divination, Grevil.”

“You sure know a lot about that sort of stuff,” Kazuya interjected. “But you don’t know how to buy a ticket.”

Neither of them responded, leaving him dejected.

“And the Arab maid...”

“Ahuh.”

“She’s gorgeous.”

“I read that in the paper.”

“The maid uttered some cryptic words about her motive. The only Arabic translator we got isn’t that good, so it’s taking some time to communicate with her. The translator mentioned that she said...” He paused, and lowered his voice. “This is the box’s revenge.”

Victorique raised her head, making eye contact with the inspector.

It was the first time that Kazuya had seen the two look at each other. He swallowed, wondering what would happen next.

Suddenly, strange-sounding voices came from a distance.

“Inspectoooooor!”

“Pectooooor!”

The three lifted their heads and saw two familiar men running from the other side of the wharf. Wearing hunting caps, they were trotting toward them, holding hands.

It was Inspector Blois’ men.

“What is it?! Did something happen?” The inspector puffed out his chest and pointed at them, stopping them in their tracks.

“Nice pose, Inspector!”

“You look so cool!”

Kazuya cast the men a sidelong glance.

Your pampering’s making him a weirdo. And he still has the weird hair...

Wondering if Victorique would say the same, Kazuya looked beside him, but she was gone. He looked around and saw that she had boarded the yacht and was eagerly examining the inside. The curiosity bug had bitten her, it seemed.

“Inspector, we have a problem! The Arabian maid—”

“—escaped!”

“What?! Are you serious?!” Inspector Blois jumped.

He was about to run off with his men, when he realized something and came back.

“Kujou! I’ve got to go! You can board the yacht, but don’t take it out. I’m the only one with a license.”

“What? Just boarding, no driving? That’s boring.”

“I know! Just suck it up!”

He held hands with his men and sprinted away.

Kazuya watched them go, dumbfounded.

Don’t take it out? Just suck it up? Come on.

Weakly, he looked back at Victorique. She had stepped off the yacht, her frilly dress all dirty, and her glistening blonde hair disheveled.

She glanced at the inspector receding into the distance, but didn’t seem bothered.

“This yacht belongs to Roxane’s granddaughter, right?” she asked.

“I think so.”

“The granddaughter inherited Roxane’s estate. So this yacht originally belonged to Roxane.”

“...It checks out.”

“So...”

Disappointed that he couldn’t drive the yacht, Kazuya only vaguely responded. When Victorique noticed this, she became annoyed and showed something she had been holding.

It was a white envelope.

“What’s this?” Kazuya asked.

“I found it in the yacht. It’s an invitation, addressed to Roxane.”

Curious, Kazuya opened the envelope.

They both sat on the edge of the yacht and read the letter inside, which was written in fluent French.

The content was a dinner invitation on a luxury liner moored on a nearby coast. The date was this evening.

“...Some parts are curious.”

“Same...”

One was the menu. The following words were spelled out in dramatically large letters:

The main course is “Hare”.

Hare.

The same animal that Roxane the fortune teller raised and fed to a hound.

Another one was the title of the dinner.

The Miniature Box Garden Evening.

“Box... We heard the same word earlier, right?”

“We did.”

Kazuya and Victorique shared looks.

Victorique’s expression had already changed to when she pestered Kazuya about being bored. He couldn’t really say what it was exactly that changed, but he knew from experience.

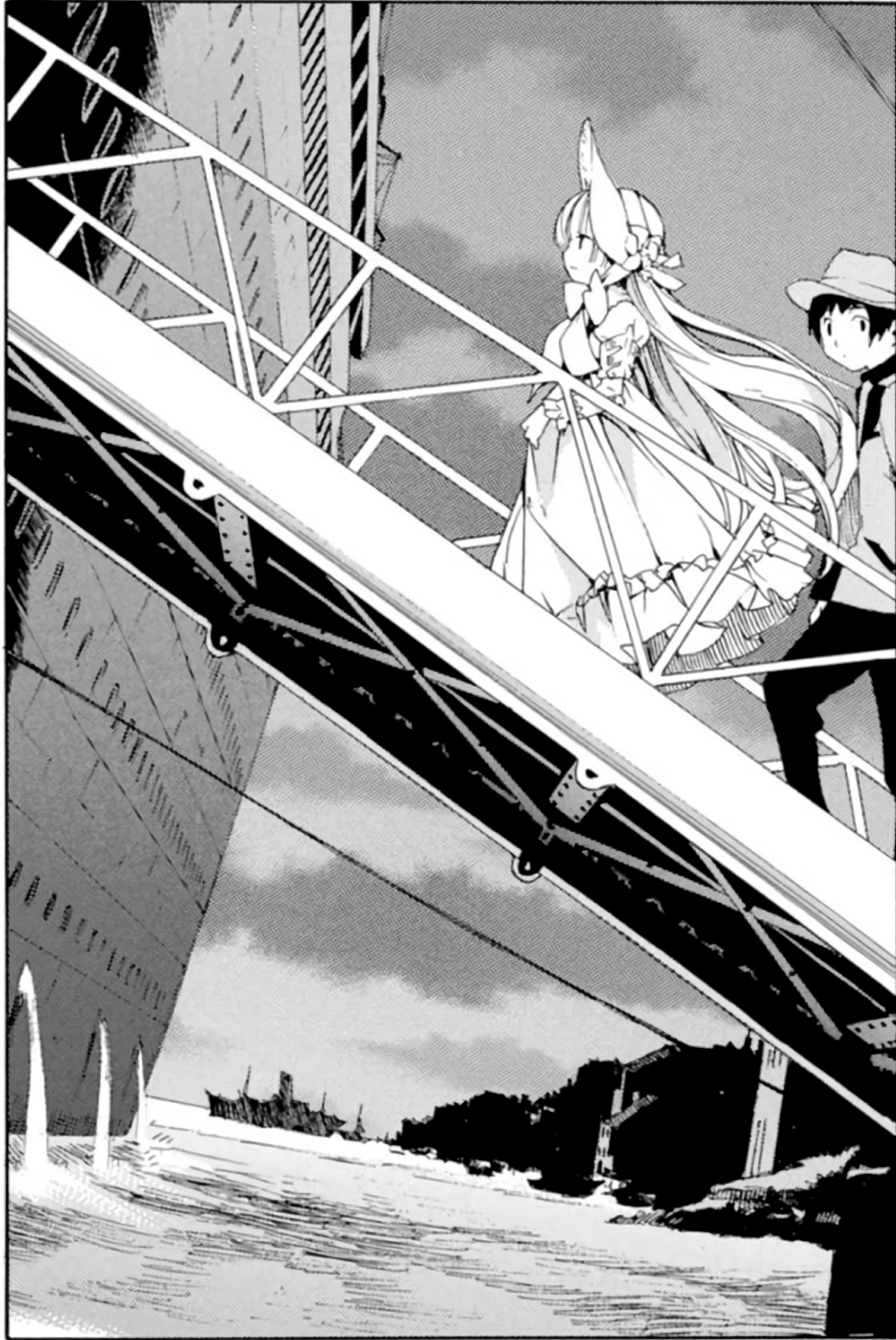
Kazuya glanced back at the yacht. It was shiny and luxurious, but not being able to drive it was boring.

They nodded at each other.

“Let’s check it out.”

“I agree.”

They relied on the map on the invitation to find the cruise ship. By the time they arrived, it was almost dark. They showed the invitation to the man standing by the ship moored on the dimly-lit shore, and boarded.



They seemed to be the last guests. The ship soon left the shore and began to move, drifting through the waves.

Huh?

It was a quiet ship. Its color was so dark that it seemed to blend with the darkness. Like a phantom, you'd miss it if you didn't look closely. A thick funnel towered eerily into the night sky. Kazuya shuddered.

Wait, this ship's name... He cocked his head. *I think I've heard it somewhere before. Hmm... I can't remember where. Oh, well.*

The ship sailed along, splitting the surface of the sea.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. The weather was not looking good.

The ship bore the name Queen Berry in subtle letters.

Monologue 1

Sauville was supposed to be a bountiful kingdom, but for an orphan crouched in an alley downtown, it was like being in a frozen forest.

Three days had passed since I escaped the institution. I'd been scavenging and stealing leftovers to survive, but I had reached my limit.

Suddenly, a sturdy arm grabbed me by the shoulders and lifted me up.

They found me, I thought. They'll take me back to the institution.

With no strength left to resist, I was thrown into a carriage with iron bars.

It was like a cage for animals.

It was dark, but having been accustomed to darkness, I saw several children in the same cage. Their clothes were tattered, and they were shivering in the cold. Most of them were boys, but there were some girls as well.

The carriage started to move. The horses' hooves clattered against the cobblestones.

I heard the same voice from the driver's seat. There were two men, discussing something.

"We've secured a child from Sauville."

"Identity?"

"Probably an orphan. It's fine. No one will look for a missing orphan."

What does that mean?

I listened closely.

"What about the rest?"

"We need two more. I'm sure we'll get them soon."

"That was easy."

It was freezing, so I leaned closer to the child beside me to keep each other warm.

The carriage rocked.

Where are they taking us?

Chapter 2: A Dark Supper

It was pitch-black around the cruise ship. Carrying a lamp, the black-skinned guide—a foreigner, it seemed—was silently leading Kazuya and Victorique.

The ship left wakes as it sailed.

It was a quiet night.

Kazuya looked up and noticed something blocking a portion of the dark, starry sky. A jet-black wall loomed above, coming closer. He looked closely and realized it was a huge funnel.

It was so huge, in fact, that it didn't seem to match the size of the ship. It stood like a jet-black tower in the middle of the liner.

“Let's go, Kujou,” Victorique said.

Kazuya hurried after her. They went down a set of stairs. He thought it would be bright inside, but it was dim, and they had to rely on the guide's lamp for light.

The two of them were ushered into a vast dining room with a long, narrow table and a shining chandelier. The chandelier was not lit; the room was dark—no, pitch-black. Warm, steaming food for ten people lay on the table. Candle flames danced in the dark, their feeble light only enough to illuminate each person's food.

There seemed to be no waiter. Food that were supposed to be brought in order were all already laid out on the table, from appetizers to main dishes.

Nine adults sat in the darkness. The clinking and clattering of forks and knives indicated that dinner had begun.

There was one empty seat in the corner, where the murdered Roxane was supposed to sit.

Kazuya turned to the guide. “There's two of us. Can we please have an extra chair—Huh?”

There was no one there. He opened the door and peered down the corridor.

The orange light of the guide's lamp wavered down the corridor, receding into the distance.

"H-Hey!"

The man should be able to hear him, but he didn't turn around.

Kazuya started to get worried. He ran after him down the dark corridor. In response, the light shifted from side to side, moving further away. The guide was running.

Why is he running away from me?

When he made it to the dark deck, the guide was nowhere to be found. Confused, he looked around.

He couldn't have just disappeared! I saw him climb up the deck!

Splash.

His ears caught the sound of water somewhere.

Kazuya raced across the deck.

The lamp's orange light was moving away on the surface of the dark sea. After showing the last guests——Kazuya and Victorique——the way, the guide probably took a boat and left the ship. It was too dark to make out whoever was riding the boat, but Kazuya was sure of that. Leaning over the railing, he watched the boat fade away into the distance.

What's going on here?

He stood there for a while.

Suddenly, the letters written on the hull of the ship flashed through his mind.

Queen Berry.

He knew he had heard that name somewhere. He tilted his head. But he couldn't remember. Kazuya gave up on chasing the man and walked back to the dining room.

"Hey, Victorique——"

People continued eating in the dark dining room, the candles by their side their only source of light. Victorique was sitting on the empty seat and partaking of the sumptuous dinner.

Small hands moved the knife and fork, bringing the food to her small mouth. It was an elegant, yet swift motion. She chewed quickly as well. The food was gradually disappearing.

Kazuya rushed beside her. "W-Wait, Victorique!"

"What is it, Kujou? I'm eating. Be quiet."

“I’m here, too.”

“I know, and?” she asked curiously. She had just finished the appetizer. Switching the knife and fork, she started on the fish.

“I’m hungry, too!”

“But the invitation was addressed to Roxane.”

“...So what?”

“There is only one Roxane. Therefore, there is only food for one person.”

“...Fine. I know the kind of person you are already. Do you have some cookies in your bag or something? I’ll settle with that.”

Deftly removing bones from the fish with the knife, Victorique lifted her head.

There was a strange smile on her unquestionably beautiful face. She looked like she was smiling, but the edges of her mouth were crooked, and her cheek was twitching.

It was the face she made when she was angry.

“I had some,” she said.

“Great! I’ll have those, then.”

“In the travel bag.”

“...What?”

“The items that my brain had deemed necessary. A utensil set, a chair set, and an emergency food set.”

“Pretty sure the utensils and chair are unnecessary.”

“The food’s in the travel bag. It must be in Ms. Cecile’s room right now. You reap what you sow.”

Victorique turned her face away, then in a low voice added, “You may be a brilliant student from the Orient, and you may come from an upright military family, but using sophism to deceive people is unacceptable. You’re also pigheaded and arrogant. I don’t have cookies to share with the likes of you. Hmph!”

What the hell?!

Kazuya was taken aback.

I know I have my flaws. I’m hard-headed and overly-serious, but still.

Grumpy, Victorique ignored him and started on the meat. Apparently, Kazuya taking charge right from the start of the trip hurt her pride.

Pigheaded, arrogant, and a sophist? He clenched his fists silently. *That's rich, coming from you!*

Kazuya felt a poke on his butt. He turned around and saw the young Caucasian man sitting next to him looking at him.

"Ah, sorry for being too loud," Kazuya said.

"Not at all. Take a seat."

But there was no vacant chair. The man gave a gentle smile and tapped his lap.

"You can sit here if you like."

"What? Uh..."

"Sit down, Kujou," Victorique hissed.

Kazuya reluctantly sat down on the stranger's lap.

Inclining his head, he looked at the man's face. *I've seen his face before*, Kazuya thought.

He was good-looking, but his pleasant smile highlighted his good nature more than his clean-cut features. His stiff Queen's English reminded Kazuya of the pretty exchange student, Avril.

Right, Avril...

"You're an English stage actor, aren't you?" Kazuya asked.

The man's face lit up. "You know me?"

"A girl in my class had a photo of you. She called you Sir Ned Baxter."

"How flattering. Here, have my food. Don't be shy."

The man brought a fork with a large slice of meat to his mouth. Bewildered, Kazuya ate it. The delicious meat melted on his tongue. Ned Baxter seemed to have a small appetite; he had left most of the dish untouched. He kept feeding Kazuya.

Victorique cast them a sidelong glance. "You make a cute couple."

"Now, listen here..."

"Have some more."

"Th-Thank you..."

In the quiet dining room, Ned Baxter prattled on about Shakespeare and the state of British theater. All the other guests continued eating in silence.

Several minutes later...

The clinking of cutlery had stopped. Ned had also gone quiet.

Light from the candles flickered in the dark room, glowing dimly in front of the ten guests—guests that had fallen asleep.

One had their head on the table, motionless. The person next to them was leaning back in their chair, mouth hanging open. There was a faint sound of snoring, then it faded.

Kazuya rolled off Ned's lap, falling to the floor with a loud thud.

Silence descended on the dining room.

There was no sound except for the hissing of the candle flames.

The door opened quietly to admit someone.

The twelfth person carefully peered into each of the guest's faces to see if they were asleep. With faint footsteps, they walked slowly around the table. They stepped on Kazuya and let out a yelp of surprise.

While regarding the boy curiously, they noticed Victorique sleeping in the seat next to him, her long, golden hair hanging down from her chair like a sash. First, they admired her exquisite beauty. Then they looked puzzled, glancing at Kazuya on the floor and Victorique in her chair.

They checked the name plate in front of Victorique.

It bore the name "Madame Roxane". They cocked their head, wondering what the girl was doing in the old lady's chair.

Unaware of the quiet intruder, the eleven guests continued sleeping peacefully.

"Hey. Wake up."

"Hmm...?"

"You bossy, quibbling, foreign exchange student. Get up."

Kazuya bolted upright. "I don't want to hear that from *you*!"

Victorique blew a puff of smoke on his face. Coughing, he fanned the smoke away with his hand.

"Stop doing that," Kazuya said. "What are you, ten?"

She looked offended, but he didn't care.

Kazuya looked around. "Uh... Where are we?"

"In one of the cabins," Victorique answered, turning her face away. "We're in the lounge."

The lounge was about the same size as the big dining room. Unlike the dining room, however, the gorgeous chandelier hanging from the ceiling was dazzlingly bright.

There was a small stage by the wall with an open music sheet, as if a band had been playing just moments before. In the middle were several

small tables for drinking and playing poker. There was a bar counter in the corner with a number of expensive-looking liquor bottles.

The people in the dining room earlier were either sitting on chairs or lying on tables, using them as beds. The bright room revealed most of them to be men in their forties or even older. Their well-tailored suits, shiny shoes and cuffs, and well-groomed mustaches suggested they were all of high status, but now they were all groaning in pain, confused.

For some reason, there was a faint pungent smell of paint thinner in the room. It prickled Kazuya's nostrils every time he breathed. Perhaps it contributed to everyone feeling unwell.

Victorique was sitting in a chair next to him, and Ned Baxter was sitting next to her. The actor was clutching his head with a pained look on his face.

Feeling a bit of headache, Kazuya glanced at Victorique. She seemed to be fine. "What's going on here?" he asked.

"The food was drugged," she replied. "When I woke up, all the guests had been moved to this lounge."

"Why?"

She did not answer.

Kazuya looked around. He was again surprised to see that the men were all older than him. Ned, who was in his mid-twenties, was the youngest one.

"They're all middle-aged men, Victorique."

"Not really. There's a woman over there."

Kazuya followed Victorique's gaze.

A young woman was sitting at a table near the door. Raven hair hanging down to her waist contrasted with her bright, red dress.

Sensing gazes, the woman looked at their direction.

Red lips that matched her dress arrested attention. Long eyelashes sat above her glittering blue eyes.

Her baby face made her look like a child dressing like an adult, but she was probably in her early twenties. Her lips were pursed, and she wore a tough look that said she was ready to engage in a squabble at any moment.

Aside from the moans and frightened whispers, the lounge was quiet. No one moved. Everybody looked anxious and in pain.

Victorique pulled her eyes away from the woman in the red dress, and whispered, "Kujou, something is off."

"...What is it?"

“There’s one extra person.”

Kazuya blinked. “Well, of course. There were seats for ten people, then both of us arrived.”

“It’s still off. There’s one more besides us.”

“What do you mean?”

Victorique stamped her foot, irritated that he couldn’t understand. “What I’m saying is, there were nine of them in the dining room. Upon our arrival, the total number of people went to eleven. Now count them all.”

Kazuya did as he was told. “One, two, three, four, five, six... You’re right!” he exclaimed when he finished counting, puzzled. “There’s twelve of us!”

“That’s right.” Victorique nodded, satisfied to have gotten her point across. “In other words, someone who wasn’t in the dining room earlier had slipped in. They might be the culprit. They didn’t eat the food we had. They moved us here after we fell asleep, and blended in with us.”

Kazuya looked around the lounge.

Not only did the men have headaches from the drug, they were all looking around like they were scared of something. They seemed to recognize each other; they gave a yelp of surprise when their gazes met.

Only the young Ned Baxter looked baffled. “What’s happening?” he mumbled. “I... I...”

Abruptly the woman in the red dress stood up. “What’s going on here?!” she yelled. “Where are we?” She grabbed the doorknob with both hands and rattled it. “Darn it... I-It won’t open.”

Everyone in the lounge turned to look at her. She took her hands off the doorknob and looked around the lounge with an alarmed expression.

“Why is this happening? Where are we? Why is the door locked?!”

No one answered.

The older men awkwardly averted their gaze. Ned, Victorique, and Kazuya were all staring at the woman. She strode toward them and plumped herself down on a nearby chair. Her small purse hit Kazuya on the head with a dull thud.

“Ouch!”

The woman made no attempt to apologize; she only looked at him and snorted.

“Are you okay?” Ned asked.

“Yeah...”

That’s one heavy purse, Kazuya thought as he glanced at the woman.

He turned to Victorique, and whispered, “Victorique. What’s going on here?”

“...Chaos,” she said irritably.

“What?”

“Unfortunately, there’s not enough fragments to reconstruct yet.”

“So you’re clueless.”

Victorique scowled. Puffing her creamy cheeks like a child, she shot Kazuya a glare. “I simply acknowledged the lack of resources. It’s not that I’m clueless.”

“...Now that’s what you call sophism.”

“Hmph! There’s nothing I don’t know. I—”

“...Arrogance.”

Kazuya and Victorique glared at each other, their jet-black and emerald eyes creating sparks.

Several seconds later, Kazuya gave in.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized despite doing nothing wrong.

“Hmph. Know your place.”

After gradually recovering from the headache caused by the drug, Kazuya got up and began checking out the lounge.

He studied the bar counter. There was nothing special about it. While he was examining the liquors on display, Victorique came up to him and cast a sweeping glance over the bottles.

“There’s wine,” she said.

“Yeah...”

Victorique uncorked one bottle and poured it into a glass nearby. The bright, reddish-purple liquid glittered under the light of the chandelier.

She stared at the label on the bottle. Then she picked up the glass, held it close to her nose, and smelled it.

“It’s an old, fine wine.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “According to the label.”

Ned tottered towards them, holding his head. “What are you doing?”

“Just wondering if there were clues around.”

“Better not touch anything, then,” the man said in a low voice.

Kazuya lifted his head, perplexed.

Ned’s face twisted. “The food was drugged. We don’t know what else they got in store.”

“Right...”

Ned scanned the room and went to a table with a tennis racket and a ball.

Ice, two glasses, and a bottle of whiskey sat at the table, as if there were people sitting there just a moment ago. The ice hadn’t melted yet. Playing cards lay scattered on the next table, as though someone left in the middle of a game.

Meanwhile, Kazuya wandered in and out of the bar counter, then went toward the stage. The sheet music was left open in the middle of what looked like a classical piece. It was as if someone had just been playing there.

Suddenly, a man stood up. “Stop wandering around!” he barked.

Startled, Kazuya and Ned turned around.

He was a fashionable man in a fine suit and gleaming jeweled cuffs, with dark brown hair parted to one side.

His freckled cheeks quivered in rage. “Y-You know this ship is dangerous! Just stay put! We don’t know what will happen if you move around!”

“What do you mean?” Victorique’s muffled voice echoed in the quiet lounge.

The man turned around, but he couldn’t find anyone that would own such a raspy voice. He just stood there, bewildered.

“Who was that?!” he said finally.

“Me.” Victorique raised her hand, drawing all eyes to her.

Everybody swallowed at the sight of the girl sitting in a chair in the corner. Victorique’s green eyes gleamed as she gave them a sweeping glance. Her golden hair hung down her tiny body like an untied turban.

There was a resounding sigh of disappointment, followed by whispers of “What a beauty!” and “Stunning!”

Awestruck, the men regarded her elaborate doll-like figure with great interest.

Kazuya rushed in front of Victorique, blocking their gaze.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Protecting you from their evil gaze.”

“...Go away. I can’t see.”

Kazuya lumbered back to his spot.

The man who had been yelling was glowering at Victorique. “Keep your mouth shut, child!”

Appalled, Kazuya tried to talk back, when someone stepped forward. He raised his head. It was the woman in red dress. Her feisty eyes glimmered.

“But there’s something wrong with this ship,” she said.

The man turned around with an indignant look.

The young woman pointed at the nearby table. “Look at that table. There are rackets, a ball, and whiskey. The ice hasn’t melted yet. It’s like someone just finished playing tennis and came here to drink. There are cards on this table here. But there’s no one else around except us.”

“Quiet!” the man roared. “Keep your mouth shut, woman!”

The woman’s eyes widened in shock.

Ned, who was standing next to her, backed her up. “Come on, man. She has a point.”

“Silence, lowly actor!”

“What?!”

Ned almost lunged at the man, but the lady locked his arms from behind. “S-Stop it!”

Fearfully, Kazuya spoke. “But still...”

The man turned and shot him a glare. “Shut up, Asian boy!”

Kazuya shut his mouth. Looking around, he realized that only the four of them were enraged at the man’s outburst—Victorique, Ned, the lady, and himself. The remaining seven men, all of the same age or a little older, gradually grouped up and kept their distance.

Ned and the lady drew closer to Kazuya.

“By that logic, he’s the only one allowed to talk,” Ned grumbled.

Kazuya gave a groan.

“A stupid logic, if you ask me. Think he’s hot shit,” the actor added.

“...Chaos,” Victorique mumbled gravely.

The lady in the dress began pacing back and forth, deep in thought. She seemed to have a habit of walking exactly five steps, turning, and then

taking another five steps and turning again. Victorique watched her with great interest.

Of the twelve people locked in the room, the eight older men seemed to know each other. They had great complexion and neat mustaches, and wore expensive suits and shiny leather shoes. They hadn't seen each other in a long time. They were whispering to each other about the situation. Each of them was either a high-ranking government official from Sauville, a manager of a major textile company, or a senior official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

As was their habit, they bragged about their positions and the schools their children attended even at a time like this. But when the conversation ended, they looked at each other anxiously and started whispering.

"So about this ship..."

"Yeah. It's just like the box back then. I didn't even notice it when I boarded."

"No way..."

Ned kept stealing glances at them, wondering what they were talking about.

Kazuya was silent, pondering matters over.

A ship... warm food... cards...

For some reason, those words put him on edge. Something was clawing at his mind, but he couldn't remember what. Feeling suffocated, he shook his head.

Noticing his state, Victorique asked, "What's wrong?"

"Well..." Kazuya looked at her. "Oh, right. The ship's name sounds familiar. I think it's Queen Berry. And..." He frowned, feeling more and more anxious as he continued.

The men in the lounge were all staring at Kazuya, their expressionless faces as pale as wax dolls. Kazuya raised his head and looked at them.

Why are they all looking at me like that? He grew more and more uneasy. *Oh, right... there was something about a vase...*

He noticed a vase of flowers sitting on an antique shelf next to him. He had a feeling that it was a key item. It was at the tip of his tongue now.

Kazuya casually reached for the vase. The men swallowed.

Abruptly, the man from earlier stood up and shouted in a panic-stricken voice, "Don't touch that vase!"

Whoosh!

Something cut through the air. An arrow from a bow gun flew over Kazuya's head and pierced the wall.

The young lady put her hands over her mouth and shrieked, backing away. Ned Baxter was also whimpering. Even Victorique was staring at Kazuya, her emerald-green eyes wide with shock.

A second later, the men screamed.

"I knew it!"

"This ship...!"

They got up quickly and bolted to the door, pushing and shoving each other. Some fell to the floor, groaning.

Victorique and Ned grabbed Kazuya, who was petrified from shock, and shook him.

"Are you all right, kid?!"

"Hey, how's it feel to almost die?!"

Kazuya's lips were quivering.

I remember.

A story about a ship, where someone touched a vase and an arrow came flying from somewhere.

Who told him, and what it was about.

Avril.

They were sitting behind the school building of St. Marguerite Academy, when she told him the story jokingly.

Yes. The ship...

"...And when the rescue team arrived on the cruise ship, there was still warm food on the dinner plates, the fireplace was blazing, and playing cards were laid out on the table. But get this! There was no one there."

"The passengers, the crew, they were all gone."

"...not a single soul around."

"When the rescue team was examining the ship, one guy casually touched a vase, and an arrow came flying from somewhere and almost killed him."

"With a huge splash and an ominous groan, it sank lower and lower into the dark depths!"

“That ship that was supposed to have sunk ten years ago has been reappearing ever since.”

“On stormy nights, the ship suddenly appears from beyond the mists, with the missing people still onboard. They lure the living into the ship and offer them as sacrifice...”

Kazuya remembered.

A table that looked like it had people on it just moments before.

Warm food.

Scattered cards.

Touching a vase triggered a trap.

And the name on the ship.

The luxury liner’s hull bore the same name as the one in Avril’s story—the Queen Berry.

“What’s the matter, Kujou?”

“V-V-Victorique. Listen close, okay? This ship we’re on... Uhm... don’t panic.”

“What is it?”

“A-And promise you won’t laugh. I’m not making this up.”

“Very well.”

“It’s a ghost ship!”

“...” Victorique opened her mouth, then with a serious look, let out a dry laugh.

Kazuya sank to the floor.

Looking down at him, Victorique said, “Hilarious.”

“I can explain. I swear it makes sense.”

Kazuya pulled himself together and told her about Avril’s story. The fashionable man, pushed away from the group of older men, listened closely. His face gradually contorted in fear.

“A ghost ship?” Victorique said, wearing a look of disbelief. “Kujou, are you actually serious?”

“Uh, yeah... I just thought, you know, it matched the story.”

“*This* ship? I thought you were joking, so I did you a favor and laughed. You’re one odd fellow.” She went to the bar counter and came back with a bottle of wine and a glass of reddish-purple liquid. “Take a good look at this drink.”

“Why?”

“The wine has a bright color, yet the label indicates it’s old.”

“...I’m not sure I follow.”

Victorique clammed up, annoyed.

Suddenly, the lights in the room went out.

The dazzling lights died, and darkness enveloped the lounge. The men at the door started screaming. Screams of both anger and fear. The darkness and the men’s panic-stricken voice struck fear into Kazuya. His knees started shaking. He stretched out his arms to protect Victorique.

He couldn’t find her. Bending down, he fumbled around while calling her name in a low voice. He grew more and more restless. He was worried about Victorique too.

But the blackout lasted only for a moment. Abruptly, the lights came on, illuminating the room brightly.

Standing in the corner, Victorique looked perplexed. “What were you doing?” she asked.

Kazuya quickly pulled his outstretched hands.

A deathly silence had fallen on the lounge. As if woken up from a dream, the men kept their mouths shut and turned their heads in shame. No one said a word. Perhaps it was the relief, or maybe they hadn’t yet recovered from the shock.

Ned’s shriek broke the silence.

Startled, everybody turned to him.

The actor was staring at the wall behind the bar. The woman in the red dress was standing nearby, leaning against the counter. She was staring at Ned, taken aback.

Ned raised one hand and pointed at the wall with the exaggerated and smooth movement of a stage actor. The woman slowly turned to look in the direction he was pointing at.

She gulped.

And then let out a shrill cry.

When the others noticed it a second later, they screamed too.

There was something on the wall that wasn’t there moments ago. Huge letters that looked like they were written in blood.

A message.

It said...

It’s been ten years since then.

How time flies.

Now it's your turn.

The box has been prepared.

Now...

Run, hares, run!

The dandy screamed out loud.

Horried, the portly man beside him shouted as well.

“That invitation...!”

“The Miniature Box Garden Evening...”

“The main dish is hare...!”

“We’re not here to watch the Running of the Hares. We *are* the hares!”

The eight men had varied reactions. Some sank to the floor, a few clutched their heads, while others looked furious.

Shocked, Kazuya and the others eyed them, wondering what their puzzling remarks meant.

“It’s ghosts! The kids have returned to sacrifice us!”

“These words written in blood is solid proof!”

The portly man rose to his feet and sprinted toward the door. Grabbing the doorknob, he pulled as hard as he could.

The door, which had been locked earlier, opened easily this time.

The man took a step forward.

Something zipped from the hallway. Something black. It looked like a black line drawn with a thick paintbrush to Kazuya.

The line hit the man right between the eyes, piercing deeper, and stopped with its tip slightly sticking out the back of his head. The black line had turned reddish-black at the tip, as if smeared by a red marker.

It wasn’t just a line.

It was an arrow from a bow gun that came from the hallway.

Everybody gaped at the scene. No one moved.

The arrow easily pierced the man’s head, as if it was made from some soft material. The arrowhead was sticking out the back of his head, covered in blood and brain matter.

After a moment of standing still...

Bam!

...the man fell on his back.

There was a moment of silence, then the woman screamed. “I-I tried to open that door, but it wouldn’t budge!” she said. “It’s true. Please believe me. But if it opened...”

Victorique watched the woman with narrow eyes as her face contorted in fear.

The remaining seven men didn’t listen to a word she just said. They stood still for a moment, and then, out of nowhere, dashed into the hallway.

“The trap’s been triggered. This door is safe now!”

“The deck! Head to the deck!”

“Run! The ship will kill us all!”

Stepping over the dead body, they scrambled across the hallway and up the stairs to the deck.

Victorique and the others looked at each other.

Ned’s face was filled with shock and suspicion. “Let’s follow them... okay?”

Kazuya, Victorique, Ned, and the lady cautiously moved to the hallway.

Lamps flickered in the luxurious corridor. Their feet sank into the soft, comfortable red carpet with every step. Eventually, they found the stairs and climbed up. Right as he was about to step out into the deck, Ned, who was walking in front, muttered with a sigh, “It’s raining. There’s a storm.”

The deck was narrower at the stern. Heavy rain beat down on the cruise ship, surrounded by the dark sea and the roaring night sky. The rain had made the deck slippery; a misstep could make one slip and fall.

The sky was dark and heavy, with no stars in sight.

Black waves tossed on the surface of the sea. The eerie darkness seemed to suck one in just by looking at it. Waves crashed loudly.

The woman frowned. “It looks really bad.”

Ned turned around. “I guess we can’t use the lifeboats.”

“Of course not. Using a boat in this weather is suicide. It’ll sink in no time.”

Hearing her voice, the men turned around. “Then what do we do?!”

“Why are you asking me?”

“I know. Let’s go to the wheelhouse. We can steer this ship back to land!”

The men clambered away in a hurry. They slipped on the wet deck, some spraining their legs, yelling in anger.

They found the wheelhouse. It was locked, so Ned tackled the wooden door down. He jumped inside, but came out with a grimace on his face.

“It’s useless...”

“Why?!” a man shouted.

“The rudder’s broken. There’s no steering this ship.”

“Lies!”

Several men jumped into the wheelhouse, pushing Ned aside. The actor staggered and almost fell.

“He’s right,” one muttered in frustration as he stepped back out. “It’s really broken.”

“...That’s what I said,” Ned muttered.

The men didn’t answer.

The Queen Berry was drifting aimlessly through the stormy sea. With no sign of the navigation officer, the ship simply floated on the sea without knowing where to go.

Assuming that Ned was the most knowledgeable about ships, the men started hounding on him.

Ned didn’t know how to deal with them. “Don’t ask me. I don’t know anything... Oh, right. Maybe we can use the radio to call for help. A rescue team might come.”

“Get on with it, then! Stop dawdling around!”

Ned was pissed, but he quickly regained his composure and pointed to the other side of the deck—to the bow.

“The radio room is in the bow. Let’s head there.”

“Hurry up!”

Ned started running. Rain pelted down on their skin so hard it hurt. The deck seemed to be twenty meters wide, but wrapped in darkness, they could not see the bow.

Ned stopped and shook his head.

“What’s wrong?” one asked.

“We can’t get there...”

“There’s a decorative funnel. It’s too big, strange for a ship of this design. Anyway, we can’t get to the other side.”

A huge, black funnel loomed in front of them, too hard to see as it blended in with the darkness. The reason they couldn’t see the bow at all

was not because it was dark, but because the funnel was blocking their view. It was the same funnel that Kazuya saw when he boarded the ship.

A decorative funnel, often used on luxury liners that focused on design.

But it seemed too large for the ship, separating the front half of the ship from the back half. Its height was low for a funnel.

Kazuya and Ned checked both ends, but there was no way through. The bow side and the stern side were completely separated by this weird funnel.

The young woman looked back at the men. Her raven hair, and dress, wet from the heavy rain, stuck to her white skin.

“There’s no way through the deck,” she said. “We have to go back inside and head to the bow from there.”

“No!” one shouted, trembling. “If we go back inside, we’ll be turned to hares! No way!”

“What’s this hare you keep talking about?!” the woman shouted back.

Ned stood beside her. “Yeah. You’ve been spouting nonsense for a while now. Those words written in blood. You know what they mean, don’t you? Tell us! You owe us that much! Hey, wait!”

The dandy shouted and pointed at the lifeboat. The men worked together and began lowering it. But the sea was rough, swaying wildly from the waves and heavy rain.

Ned, the woman, and Kazuya tried their best to stop them.

“If you go out in this weather, you’re dead!”

“Shut up!”

One after another, the men escaped into the boat, ignoring Ned’s attempt to persuade them.

Right before the dandy boarded the boat, he looked back with an uneasy frown.

“It’s not safe!” the woman said. “Just stay!”

His bloodshot eyes quivered restlessly. After several seconds of silence, he said, “Fine.”

He glanced at the rough sea, the boat, and the faces of the remaining youngsters.

The other men paid no attention to the dandy; they didn’t look back either. The dandy watched the men with eyes full of doubt and irritation.

Despite the woman’s insistence, the lifeboat descended to the sea.

The boat, carrying six men, fell.

Kazuya and the others leaned over the railing and watched.

The boat rocked in the waves for just a moment. Then a huge wave swept it away, rocking it sideways and capsizing it.

Shouting, Kazuya watched helplessly as the men disappeared into the ocean floor.





The men were dragged to the bottom of the sea before they even had time to scream. White foam bubbled between the waves and drifted away. The boat vanished.

It happened in the span of only a few seconds.

Heavy rain beat down on the people who remained on deck.

Kazuya looked at the faces of Ned and the woman standing beside him.

Ned's face was pale. Speechless, he was shaking, his lips blue.

And the woman...

She wore a curious, satisfied smile as she looked down at the disappearing boat. Her eyes were horrifyingly cold.

Her lips moved as she muttered something. She wasn't talking to anyone in particular, but Kazuya's ears caught her words.

"I warned you," she said.

Suddenly, she noticed Kazuya looking at her. She faced him this time, and said in an indifferent tone, "Grownups are always stupid. They're so full of themselves, and they do things that don't make sense."

Shrugging, she walked back to the stairs to the cabin.

"Come on... You can't say that! It's insensitive."

Kazuya's voice didn't reach her.

He watched her go with anger and shock.

The remaining five people headed back to the lounge. Trudging down the corridor, they entered the room through the open door, with the woman going in first.

Her eyes opened wide as soon as she stepped inside. Her hands slowly moved to her mouth, and she let out a yelp.

Kazuya, who was next to enter, asked, "What's wrong?"

"Ah... ah..." She closed her eyes.

Then screamed.

Ned rushed to the room. "What?! What happened?!"

The woman started crying. Shaking, she raised her slender arms and pointed inside.

"This room..." she mumbled.

"What about the room?"

"No!"

Kazuya peered into the room himself, and immediately became speechless.

The lounge had completely changed.

In just several minutes, the walls, ceiling, and floor had become soggy. The bar counter, tables, and liquor bottles were still intact, but like a sunken ship that had been at the bottom of the ocean for a long time, the walls were rotten and soaked, and dirty water was dripping down from the ceiling.

A dim lamp illuminated the wet lounge.

The woman began sobbing hysterically. Ned stood beside her, flustered. He tried to console her, but she cut her off.

“What the hell is going on?! Somebody do something!”

Ned shut his mouth and looked around. “How did this happen? The words are still there on the wall...”

The same bloody words danced on the wall, illuminated eerily by the pale lamp. Ned kicked a rotting table a little and it crumbled. The smell of seawater wafted from the wreckage. The floor was also soft and rotten, and with every step he took, he felt an unpleasant squishing sensation under his foot.

“...Hey.”

Ned turned around. He was standing in the middle of the lounge, staring at them with a stunned look on his face. Slowly, he pointed to the floor near the door.

He shot the others a pleading look. “Where’s the body of the old man that was shot by the bow gun?”

Abruptly the woman stopped crying. Astonished, Kazuya also looked around.

The body was gone. It was nowhere to be found in the waterlogged lounge. Even the blood and the brain matter had vanished cleanly.

“Don’t you find that suspicious?!” the woman cried. “He must have done it! He locked us up and pretended to be dead. He’s probably enjoying giving us a scare. Come out! Show yourself!”

She wandered around the lounge, peeking under the tables.

“Calm down,” Ned said. “He was dead. I checked. I’m sure about it.”

“Then I guess you’re in on it too!”

Ned scowled. “Enough already!”

They glared at each other.

“Stop arguing,” the dandy interjected. “It’s stupid.”

“Stupid?”

“Let’s take a seat. I’m tired...”

The five people looked at each other.

They sat down on chairs that were relatively dry.

Irritated and restless, Ned began tapping his foot. Every shake made a splashing sound. The young woman sat down, her face pale, and cradled her head in her hands. Her raven hair hung down to her knees. The dandy was incredibly quiet. He looked terrified, his lips dyed a purple color.

Only Victorique was sitting in her usual elegant and calm manner. A glance at her face made Kazuya feel relieved.

The five introduced themselves.

“I’m Maurice,” the dandy began. “A senior official in Sauville’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.” He didn’t say anything else.

“I’m Julie Guile,” the woman said next. “I’m... unemployed. My father owns a coal mine.”

She appeared to be the daughter of a wealthy man. Maurice snorted.

“...What? I can live without working. What’s it to you?”

Ned Baxter, who seemed to be a hard worker, frowned a little.

When Kazuya and Victorique introduced themselves, Maurice seemed to recognize Victorique’s last name and suddenly changed his attitude. He remained arrogant to the other three.

Exhausted, they were slumped down on their seats, staring at each other’s faces.

The woman—Julie Guile—whispered, “What is going on here? Where are we? Why is this happening?” She seemed to have calmed down a little.

“Seriously. I have no idea what’s going on,” Ned said.

“I don’t know either,” Kazuya added.

Maurice was quiet, his gaze downward. Eventually they turned their attention to the silent man, and Victorique, who was observing him closely.

A quiet tension filled the room.

And when it reached its highest point, Victorique spoke.

“...Maurice,” she called in a clear, but raspy voice.

The man gave a start. Everyone had their eyes on them.

Maurice stiffened like a frog under the stare of a snake as he waited for Victorique's next words.

"You warned my friend earlier when he tried to touch that vase."

"I-I did..."

"How did you know about the mechanism?"

Maurice bit his lip.

Julie and Ned gasped.

Silence descended over the waterlogged, shadowy lounge.

Drip. Drip.

The obnoxious sound of water dripping echoed in the room. Maurice didn't answer.

"All but the four of us seemed to know about it. The eight older men kept uttering words incomprehensible to us. The only one who survived was you, Maurice. Shouldn't you offer the young ones an explanation?"

Maurice continued to bite his lips hard.

Drip. Drip.

It was silent, save for the sound of water.

Finally, Maurice lifted his head slowly in resignation. "Because it's the same," he mumbled.

"The same as what?"

"What happened ten years ago. That's how I knew." His face was as pale as a dead man's. Opening his purpled lips, he added, "We're onboard the Queen Berry, a ship that sank in the Mediterranean Sea ten years ago. It's happening again. That's how I knew."

Monologue 2

Someone was shaking me.

When I opened my eyes, I saw jet-black eyes peering at me with concern. Her long hair, black as her eyes, was hanging to the floor.

It was a beautiful girl, about the same age as me.

“Ugh...”

As I tried to get up, the pain in my head made me wince.

The girl gasped and propped me up with her small hands.

Where are we?

What happened?

Holding my head, I looked around. It was a huge lounge, dotted with chairs and high-quality round tables. Bottles of alcohol lined the bar counter in the corner. There was a small stage, where a music sheet was left open.

Boys and girls around the same age as me were lying on the gleaming, wooden floor. There seemed to be more than ten of them. Every one of them was holding their head, grumbling about the pain.

The children were all of various races, with the overwhelming majority being Caucasian. A large German-looking boy with blond hair and blue eyes, and a boy with sun-dried, curly hair who looked like he had grown up in the Mediterranean. A small, yellow-skinned boy who looked Chinese. There was also a boy and girl with the same dark complexion, but when they spoke, they became confused when they realized they were speaking different languages.

I could understand the English and the French murmurs, but not the other languages, especially when they talked fast.

The yellow-skinned boy came up beside me and helped me get up. I thanked him in French, and he nodded, as if he understood what I said.

“Where are we?” asked someone in clear English.

Their loud voice drew all the kids’ attention. A thin, Caucasian boy with short hair and healthy tanned skin, was standing there.

“A grown man in a strange carriage took me. After feeding me, I fell asleep. Next thing I know, I’m here. My head hurts... What’s going on?”

I stood up and told him that the same thing happened to me.

“You guys too?” the boy asked anxiously.

The kids who understood English nodded. The freckled boy looked around the lounge. After pacing restlessly around the room, he lifted his head and stared at the door. He reached for the doorknob... and opened it.

I approached the door and peered outside. There was a long corridor. Glaring lamps illuminated the magnificent wooden walls and the crimson carpet.

The freckled boy looked at me with an anxious frown.

“Hey...” He cocked his head. “Is it just me, or is this place rocking?”

“...It feels like it.” Now that he mentioned it, the floor seemed to be swaying from side to side in regular intervals.

Where are we? What are we doing here?

A girl holding her head suddenly looked up. “Maybe it’s an earthquake! That’s gotta be it!”

The lounge stirred. Some kids rushed to get under tables. Just before everyone started panicking, the Chinese boy who helped me up said in elegant English, “No.”

Everyone turned to look at him.

“It’s not an earthquake.”

“...How can you be so sure?” the freckled boy asked.

“Because we’re not on land,” the Chinese boy said in a level tone.

“What?”

“This rocking is caused by waves. We’re at sea. This room is probably one of the cabins. We’re not in a building on land. I think it’s a ship.”

The lounge fell silent.

The freckled boy took a few kids who had recovered from their headaches out into the corridor. Among them was the Chinese boy from earlier and the dark-haired girl who woke me up.

Lamps brightly illuminated the corridor. The red carpet was so premium that it looked like it had never been stepped on before. My foot sank softly with each step; I felt like I was going to fall over.

“I’m sure we’re somewhere on the upper decks,” the Chinese boy said.

“How do you know?”

“On a cruise ship like this, the upper floors are reserved for first-class passengers who pay higher fares for the luxury. That’s why the lounge, the cabins, and even the corridor are so extravagant.”

“I see...”

“The lower you go, the cheaper the cabins become, cramming in second and third class passengers and facilities for the crew. The lights are dimmer and the carpets are old. Further down are the cargo hold and the boiler room. It gets filthy down there that it’s hard to believe it’s the same ship.”

“You sure know a lot,” the freckled boy muttered dubiously.

The Chinese boy gave a wry chuckle. “No need to be so suspicious. I’ve been on a ship like this as a third-class passenger.”

As we walked, we began introducing ourselves. The freckled boy’s name was Huey. The Chinese boy was Yang.

“What about you?” one asked.

“It’s Alex,” I answered. “Nice to meet you.”

“Are you French? You spoke French first, and your English has a bit of an accent.”

“No. I’m from Sauville.”

“Ah, right. That country’s official language is French.”

The dark-haired girl couldn’t understand English nor French. But she seemed to grasp that everyone was introducing themselves, so she pointed to her face, and said, “Lee.” She then used her fingers to indicate that she was fourteen years old.

As Yang explained, the floor with the luxurious lounge was located on the upper level. As we climbed the staircase, we immediately found ourselves on the deck of the ship.

One by one, we stepped out into the open. The boys’ steps made thumps on the worn wooden deck. When we all made it up, we froze.

We were really at sea.

The sea at night...

A darkness so deep enveloped the surrounding, the kind you wouldn’t imagine were you in town. Black waves made gentle, crashing sounds. A pale moon sat in the distance, casting a line of light over the sea. A dark ocean as far as the eye could see. I couldn’t see anything but the cruise ship.

One of the boys raced across the deck.

“Hello!” he shouted. “Is anyone there?! Please help us!”

There was no sound, save for the breaking and retreating waves.

The Hungarian girl scurried after the boy. She was large and chubby. She leaned over the railing and was about to scream when a sharp sound cut through the air.

A shrill scream followed.

“What’s wrong?” Huey asked.

“Something just grazed my face,” the Hungarian girl said. “When I stepped around here, something flew from over there and into the water.”

Huey reached for the girl’s face. The viscous blood on his hands was clearly visible even in the dark.

Something had grazed the girl’s right cheek, causing a shallow gash. Blood was dripping from it. As soon as the girl noticed it, she shrieked and sank down on the spot.

Huey and Lee helped her up. They looked toward the direction the girl had pointed, but the darkness hampered any sort of vision.

Yang, who went in the wheelhouse, came back, shaking his head. “It’s no use,” he said. “The rudder’s broken. No, it was destroyed.”

“Why? Why are we even here? And there’s no sign of anyone on this ship besides us. Why are there only kids here?”

Yang shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Huey got to his feet. “We’re just stranded out here. What about the radio? A ship like this has to have a radio, right?”

“Right. Hey, Alex. The radio room’s in the bow, right?” Yang asked.

I shook my head. I didn’t know since I’d never been on a ship like this.

“It should be there!”

Huey and Yang started running, but soon came back, their heads hung low.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“No good. There’s a really big funnel blocking the way. We can’t get to the bow through the deck. It’s probably just a decorative funnel, but it’s too big. Like it was built in that size on purpose. We can’t get to the radio room.”

“Then what do we do?”

Huey looked up. “There’s a way. Not up here, but back inside. Go down the stairs, through the corridor, and up the stairs on the other side. That’ll

take us to the bow. Let's go radio for rescue."

"Good idea." Yang nodded. "I'm sure they'll get here fast."

I felt a soft touch on my arm. An anxious Lee was sticking close to me. We couldn't understand each other, so I gave a nod to tell her that it would be all right.

We went back down the stairs, supporting the Hungarian girl from both sides.

The lamps still lit up the corridor brightly. The soft, red carpet felt different from a moment ago. It seemed as black as the color of blood. The Hungarian girl began sobbing quietly. Lee and I exchanged glances and put more strength into the arms supporting her.

Back in the lounge, the boys, having recovered from their headaches, looked horrified when they saw the injured girl.

They were sitting on chairs, hanging their heads down nervously. Their faces, illuminated by the chandelier, were pale, and their eyes were dark. They stood up.

"Hey..." one called.

"Wh-What's going on?" another added.

They approached us, and Huey held them back. "I'll explain now."

On behalf of the others, Huey told them what happened on deck. He then suggested that we all head towards the bow where the radio room was. No one objected; they simply nodded weakly.

We all gave brief introductions. Names, age, and country of origin. And how we ended up here.

There was one thing different between all of us—our nationalities.

Britain, France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Italy, the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, China, and Sauville.

There were several people, including Lee, who did not understand the language, but apparently none of the eleven boys and girls were of the same nationality. It was as if we were gathered from all over the world.

And we had something in common.

We were all orphans. No one would come searching for us even if we disappeared.

We went back down the corridor. All eleven of us this time, heading to the opposite direction from before.

The uneasiness almost brought my headache back. I held my head and groaned. Noticing my discomposure, Lee stopped.

“Alex...”

Lee pointed to the heart-shaped pendant around her neck. It was pink and shiny, coated in enamel. She grabbed my hand and made me touch it. She then closed her eyes, gesturing me to calm down.

The pendant seemed to be her lucky charm. It was like she was saying, “With this, we’ll both be all right.”

Her big black eyes were filled with a gentle glow. A kind girl, I thought. I nodded in appreciation and resumed walking with everyone else.

Huey and Yang, who were leading the way, suddenly gave surprised grunts. Startled, we all stopped in our tracks.

“It’s blocked,” Huey muttered.

“What do you mean?!” The Hungarian girl made her way to the front. We were split into two groups; even from way back, what blocked the way was clearly visible.

A wall.

The corridor was blocked by a black wall that reached the ceiling.

“We can’t pass through here!” Yang turned around with an ashen face, and started running down the corridor.

“Yang!” I called.

He looked over his shoulder. “This can’t be the only hallway on this floor. We have to check if there’s one that can take us to the bow!”

Everybody nodded and followed Yang. But the corridors were all blocked by the same black wall. The Hungarian girl began sobbing. Some of the kids started crying along with her.

Huey and Yang were discussing things in whispers, then lifted their heads.

“Let’s go find an elevator!”

Everyone raised their heads.

“We’re going downstairs,” Huey said firmly. “It might not be blocked. Got it? Let’s go look for an elevator.”

Yang pointed to the other end of the hallway. “It’s over there.”

The two boys led the way.

In a particularly bright corner was an elevator, its eerie iron cage gleaming darkly. There was also a staircase with shining white tiles next to

it, but for some reason its lights were off. It was as if darkness veiled it.

Huey looked over at the kids. “There’s stairs as well. What’re you gonna do?”

They all looked at each other. Afraid of the dark stairs, they quickly scrambled into the elevator. Huey watched the crammed kids with mouth open.

“A couple more should be fine,” he said, pulling himself together. “Yang, Alex, take them to the floor below.”

“What about you?”

He pulled on Lee’s hand and started walking toward the stairs. “Lee and I will take the stairs. We’ll meet down there.”

Lee looked back and waved her hand. It was a cute gesture. Yang signaled with his eyes, and we boarded the elevator.

The bars closed with metallic clanks. Slowly, the elevator descended.

Everyone was tense and silent under the white glare of the lamp.

Suddenly, a girl’s scream rang out. It was Lee’s voice.

Yang rushed to open the elevator. The elevator rattled to a stop a floor below, then the bars slowly opened. Everyone scurried out of the lift.

“Lee!”

“Huey! What happened?!”

I took a step toward the dark stairs. The thick darkness was overwhelming, so I could only manage to call for them. I could hear faint sobbing from above.

“Lee!”

As I started running up the stairs, Yang spotted a small emergency flashlight in the elevator, picked it up, and followed me. He switched it on and illuminated the darkness at the top of the stairs.

The white, round, dim light of the flashlight illuminated a body.

Letting out shrieks, we all froze in place.

Huey had collapsed, lying on the landing of the stairs like a broken marionette. He was face-down, his left hand hidden under his body and his right hand stuck closely against his lower back.

Lee was crouched down beside him.

“What happened?!” the German boy yelled at Lee. He was large and intimidating, with a build much more closer to an adult than a fourteen-year-old boy.

Lee couldn't explain it well. She gestured that she had followed Huey down the stairs and found him lying there.

The German boy shouted in English with a thick German accent. "I can't understand a thing!"

I ran over to Huey to get a pulse. I took his exposed right hand and pressed my finger against the wrist.

His pulse had completely stopped.

"How did he even die?"

Lee shook her head to say she didn't know.

The only thing glowing on the pitch black stairs was the round light of Yang's flashlight. The shock made him drop it, and it rolled down the stairs, leaving the stairs dark once more.

The silence lay as thick as death.

Suddenly, someone let out a sharp scream.

"No! I've had enough! I'm going home!"

It was the Hungarian girl with the injured cheek. It was followed by the sound of someone running down the stairs. I quickly followed her.

Yang swallowed. "Hey, where are you going?! Stay close!" There was no reply. "It's dangerous. We have to stay together!"

I reached the hallway one floor below. Looking around, I saw the back of a girl running away in the dark. She turned the corner before disappearing.

"Hey...!"

The boys who followed me exchanged glances.

We couldn't just leave her alone. After designating the elevator as a rendezvous point, we all started looking for her.

The hallway seemed a little dark, despite being only a floor below.

The lighting was a little dimmer than in the hallway where the lounge was located, and the wood had more knots in them. The darker spots on the deep-red carpet suggested it was old, and the middle area where people often walked had become shaggy, the fabric thinner.

Cabins flanked the unchanging corridor. It almost felt like going around the same place.

As I walked alone on the incredibly soft carpet, I grew increasingly anxious.

A knot formed in my gut. My heart drummed in my chest.

For some reason, I didn't want to turn the next corner. My feet felt like stopping on their own. Mustering up some courage, I forced myself to turn the corner, slowly.

And then...

The Hungarian girl we were looking for was standing there. Alone. Her eyes were wide and stiff, as if in shock. Our eyes met. I tried to move away, but I couldn't.

She was dead.

My mouth dropped open and a scream so loud I couldn't believe it was mine ripped through my throat.

She wasn't *standing* there. She was skewered against the wall with a knife through her throat. I wobbled closer and reached out, hoping to do something.

The moment I touched her with my trembling hand, the knife that had been wedged into the wall came off and her body fell into my arms.

It was heavy. There was substantial weight.

Hearing my scream, the kids came one by one. As soon as they appeared around the corner, they screamed at the sight of the body.

Yang approached gingerly. "Alex... you okay?"

I responded with a weak nod. The kids could only shiver as they looked at each other. Eventually, the huge German boy raised his voice in rage.

"Who killed her?!"

"I don't know," Yang answered.

"You don't know?!" The answer made him furious.

"None of us had a knife. We were all dragged into this ship empty-handed. And I have no idea what a military knife is doing in a passenger ship."

"What are you saying...?"

We exchanged looks. Lee also appeared, and when she saw the girl's body, she swallowed, covering his mouth with her hand.

Holding a dead body amid the silence, there was one thing I could not tell anyone.

The drawer of an antique shelf at the end of the hallway was slightly open. From where I was standing, I could see into its contents.

Inside was a small gun, its barrel gleaming an ominous black.

There were weapons on the ship.
But why?

Chapter 3: The Ghost Ship Queen Berry

A heavy atmosphere filled the waterlogged lounge. Only Victorique remained calm and indifferent, while the other four were either hanging their heads low or glaring at each other.

Drip. Drip.

Cloudy drops of water fell from the ceiling and seawater-soaked walls to the floor. A damp air enveloped the entire lounge.

“This ship once carried eleven boys and girls,” Maurice began. “We called them Hares.” Shivering, he hugged his knees like a child.

The other four exchanged glances.

Julie Guile rose to her feet and moved closer to Maurice. “What do you mean?”

“What happened to them?” Ned Baxter asked in a low voice.



“They died. Killed each other.”

“Wh-Why?!”

“It was part of the plan,” Maurice mumbled, raising his head slowly. Terror and despair filled his eyes as he stared at the bloody words on the wall. His pale lips parted. “I can’t tell you any more. It would be a breach of code. Anyway, at the end of that fateful night, after the bodies of the kids were recovered, the Queen Berry was sent to the bottom of the sea. Immediately after we finished the recovery work and pulled out, the coast guard rushed to check the ship, but of course the inside was empty. Since there were still traps left, and signs of struggle, they tried to do an investigation, but the ship was already sinking. A-And you...” Maurice pointed at Kazuya. “The ghost story that you heard from your classmate is based on that incident. When I heard you say that the Queen Berry frequently reappears at sea to lure people, I was certain.” His voice turned grim. “This ship is a ghost ship!”

Ned and Julie looked at each other. They wore dubious expressions, but their faces were tight from fear.

Ned grabbed a tennis ball and tossed it up. He caught the ball as it fell and threw it up again. Julie got up and started pacing back and forth in the lounge.

“This ghost ship is raised to the surface by the children’s grudges,” Maurice continued. “It’s been ten years since then.” His shoulders began to shake, his face ashen. “The adults who caused their death were gathered here and died. We’re next.” His shivering spread through his whole body, and with a despairing look, he added, “There’s no way we can get to the radio room! We’re being cursed by those kids... by the Hares!”

“...Pfft.”

Someone snickered. Maurice shot Kazuya a glare, but he shook his head. He looked to the side and saw Victorique sitting with her head down. Her face was hidden by her long, blonde hair that looked like golden threads. Her small shoulders were shaking.

“...Um, Victorique?”

“Uhh...”

“Stop acting weird.” Kazuya reached for her hair and brushed it up.

Tears were running down Victorique’s cheeks... from laughter.

“Ahahahahaha!”

“What’s so funny?!”

Ned stopped fiddling with the tennis ball, and Julie stopped pacing around. Startled, they stared at the laughing Victorique.

Victorique took out a pipe from her bag in an elegant motion. Ignoring the adults staring at her blankly, she lit it up and took a puff.

She slowly exhaled, directing the smoke toward Maurice’s face. The man coughed as he wiped the tears from the corners of his eyes with his fingers.

After smoking her pipe for a while, Victorique reached into the pocket of her dress with her free hand and pulled out an envelope. Kazuya recognized it. It was the invitation that Victorique found in Roxane’s yacht.

“Oh, I got one too,” Ned said.

“Me too,” Julie chimed in. “I found it in my car.”

“Let me ask you a question, Maurice.” Victorique chuckled at the foreign affairs official, who was three times her age. “Do you think a ghost would write an invitation?”

Maurice gulped, taken aback. The others snapped back to their senses. They exchanged glances, blinking repeatedly as if they had just woken up from a dream.

“B-But that doesn’t make sense,” Maurice said, puzzled. He wanted to argue back, but he wasn’t exactly sure what to say. “This ship *did* sink to the bottom of the sea. And what about those bloody words on the wall? The power was out for less than ten seconds! No human being can write a long sentence in big letters in such a short time. And this lounge looks completely different than before!” Tears welled in his cloudy eyes. “How do you explain all that?! If it’s not ghosts, then who did it?!”

“A human being, obviously,” Victorique said in a low voice.

She had finally stopped laughing. Ned was clutching the tennis ball anxiously. Julie was pacing around, fiddling with the heart-shaped pendant around her neck like it was a habit.

She walked five steps, then turned. Another five steps. It was an unconscious but precise movement. Victorique shot her a glance and frowned a little.

The pendant was made of enamel. It was quite old, with the paint peeling off in places. It had a very childish design that didn’t match her red

dress, but Julie kept caressing it with her fingers like it was something precious.

“A human can do all of that. Think about it a little.”

“What? What do you mean?” Maurice moved his face closer to the girl.

Victorique squirmed in disgust and turned to Kazuya. “Kujou, you explain,” she said crossly.

“Huh? Explain what?”

“Reconstructing chaos.”

“...Me?”

Clear, green eyes held Kazuya’s gaze. A mere three seconds later, he lost the staring contest.

“So um, chaos, or the mysteries of this world,” he began. “They’re like, you know, pieces, which you throw in a pot to stew. Like, um, a mystery hot pot. You fill your bowl, the fragments of chaos is reconstructed, and then the mystery is solved, but the inspector takes the credit... Wait, what am I talking about again?”

“That’s enough, you mediocre egghead.”

“Wh-What? I’ll have you know, I wouldn’t be able to study abroad if I was mediocre,” Kazuya mumbled.

Victorique ignored him and spoke. “First of all, ghosts. They don’t write invitations. You understand that, yes?”

Ned nodded first. Julie followed, and finally Maurice nodded reluctantly.

Victorique waved the invitation. “Someone wrote this and gathered us here.”

“But this ship is supposed to be at the bottom of the sea!”

“How do you know this is the Queen Berry that sank ten years ago?”

Maurice tried to say something, but closed his mouth.

“I offer a hypothesis,” Victorique continued.

All of them watched the girl who kept talking with such confidence with bated breath.

““This is a recreation of the ship made by someone familiar with the past incident.”

Silence.

Ned and Maurice looked at each other and fell silent. Kazuya was also scowling. The only sound in the flooded lounge was the dripping of water.

Eventually, Julie came to her senses. “What do you mean by that?” she asked gingerly.

Victorique looked straight back at her. She still assumed the same confident attitude. “It is a very simple and logical explanation,” she began in her usual low and raspy voice. “First of all, the Queen Berry is said to have sunk ten years ago. If that’s true, then the ship we’re on now is a well-made replica.”

“What...?”

“If you think about it that way, it all makes sense. It would explain the ghostly phenomena as well.”

Julie frowned and thought about it. “I’m not sure I follow,” she said.

Victorique looked fed up. Smoking her pipe, she said, “Try using your noses.”

All four of them wrinkled their noses, but the smoke from Victorique’s pipe was in the way.

“Doesn’t it smell like fresh paint?” she said.

“Oh!”

Kazuya remembered the paint thinner he smelled. It had filled the entire lounge. It also probably contributed to their headache, not just the sleeping pills.

“And the wine I was studying. Do you remember, Kujou?”

He did. The bottle of wine. The glass she poured it into. He couldn’t believe himself for even suggesting that they were on a ghost ship. The power went out immediately after that, so he completely forgot about it.

“The same bottle of wine should be on this lounge’s bar.” Victorique pointed toward the counter, directing everyone’s gaze to it. The counter was lined with liquor bottles. “The wine I uncorked and poured into the glass has returned to its original spot. Isn’t that strange?”

“Ah...”

Kazuya couldn’t find the wine that Victorique had uncorked, nor the glass into which she had poured the contents. When he approached the counter and examined it, he found a sealed bottle with the same label on it.

Victorique beckoned Kazuya to her and took the bottle of wine. “This is wine from Sauville, brewed in 1890, that is, more than thirty years ago. It was probably on board the real Queen Berry, which sank ten years ago, so

the culprit put this same wine here in an attempt to faithfully recreate it. But...”

Victorique shrugged. She uncorked the bottle and poured it into a dirty glass nearby. Like before, a bright reddish-purple liquid poured out of the bottle.

“The content is fake. You can see that it has the bright color of newly-brewed wine. Old wine has a much darker color. The aroma as well...” She lifted the glass to her nose. “It smells new.”

“What’s going on here?” Kazuya asked.

Victorique pointed to the label. “This brewery was burned down in the summer of 1914, when the Great War started. This wine is no longer available. So the culprit reproduced only the label and swapped it.”

The four of them looked at each other. They all wore anxious expressions.

“But what about the bloody writing on the wall?!” Maurice exclaimed. “This flooded lounge?! Where did the body go?!”

“You don’t have to shout, Maurice.” Victorique frowned. “I can hear you just fine.” She got up her chair and started walking. As she opened the door, she said, “I don’t think this is the room we were in before.”

“Huh?!”

“We went out to the deck once, then came back. We passed through the same corridor and entered this room. Why is that?”

“Because the door was open,” Julie answered. “The other rooms were closed.”

“Exactly. Kujou.”

Kazuya stood up. Victorique went out into the hallway and motioned him with her finger.

“Open the doors on this side in order.”

“Okay...”

Kazuya opened the door to the next room. It was a luxurious first-class cabin, with a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, a large canopied bed, and a soft sofa. The tablecloth and closet were also fancy.

He opened the next door. It was an identical cabin. The next few rooms all looked similar. Kazuya was getting tired.

He returned to the lounge, then opened the next door on the other side this time.

What he saw took his breath away. He turned to Victorique, his mouth flapping open and shut.

Victorique nodded and beckoned the other three. They all peered into the next room.

It was the same exact lounge, like a picture-perfect copy. Tables and a bar counter. A small stage. And...

Bloody writing on the wall.

A glass and an open bottle of wine sitting on the counter.

The corpse of a portly man, an arrow lodged in his head, lying on the floor.

Julie and Maurice screamed.

Kazuya turned around and saw Victorique nodding in satisfaction.

“This was the room we were in. I don’t know who closed and opened the doors, but this was a simple trick.”

The five of them entered the original lounge.

The chandelier’s glow was too bright compared to the flooded lounge’s. It made them uncomfortable. They each took their seat and stared at each other’s faces.

Victorique looked at the wall with the bloody writing. Her gaze was sharp as a knife’s. She then pointed to the bar counter by the wall.

“Kujou, go take a look inside.”

“What...?”

“I have finished reconstructing the fragments of chaos. You will find the answer there. There should be something that wasn’t there before.”

Confused, Kazuya stood up. He went to the bar counter and, as told, peered inside. There was something rolled there, as if someone was hiding it. *A large cloth?* he wondered. *No...*

“It’s wallpaper!” Kazuya exclaimed.

His voice pulled Julie and Ned out of their seats. They peered into the counter as well.

“Ah!”

“Is this what I think it is?”

Rolled up in there was a wallpaper with the same pattern as the wall. It was crumpled and forcibly crammed inside.

Maurice approached as well. “I-It’s really a wallpaper!”

“Yes.” Victorique nodded coolly. “Allow me to explain, Maurice. It’s true that you can’t write a long sentence on a wall in just under ten seconds. But it’s enough time to remove the wallpaper plastered over the writing and hide it, wouldn’t you agree?”

Ned let out a sigh. “I see.”

Julie shook her head, fiddling with her pendant. Her long, raven hair bounced in the air. “Huh. It’s so simple once you figure it out.”

Ned started playing with the tennis ball again, and Julie resumed pacing back and forth every five steps. They probably couldn’t relax.

Maurice alone was glaring at them, his shoulders shaking. He was standing firm, looking at every person in turn, and then suddenly shouted.

“You bastards!”

Victorique frowned. “Where did that come from?”

Maurice retreated back to the wall. Fearfully, he regarded the faces of Kazuya, Ned, Julie, and finally Victorique.

“Who’s the Hare?” he asked in a shaky voice.

The other four looked at Maurice with puzzled faces.

“What do you mean by Hare?”

“It’s the children’s alias. That’s what we called them!” He was shaking. He put his back against the wall with the bloody writing. “I’m right, aren’t I?! If this isn’t a ghost ship... If this isn’t a curse, then what is it?!”

Everybody exchanged glances. Then Julie let out a gasp and brought her hands to her mouth.

“...Revenge?” she murmured.

“I-I see!” Ned said.

“Don’t play dumb!” Maurice yelled. “Who received the invitation? The adults from back then, including me, were gathered here. They all died, and I’m the only one who survived. But there are four youngsters here... Who are you?! You were not a part of us ten years ago. Then why did you receive an invitation?!”

“Not all Hares died,” he continued with ragged breaths. “The few who survived were freed. They were to be fattened up, so they were guaranteed a life of luxury after the ordeal. There’s a survivor among you. And after ten years...”

Julie was fiddling furiously with her pendant. Ned was clutching his tennis ball.

“They built this replica to take revenge on us!”

“You’re wrong,” Julie said.

“I don’t know anything,” Ned added.

The two shot each other confused looks.

“Then why do you have an invitation?!”

Kazuya fearfully explained himself and Victorique.

They were classmates at school. They had planned to go sailing on the weekend, but it was cancelled at the last minute. Bored and with nothing to do, they looked around the yacht and found the invitation.

Maurice’s face turned pale when he heard that the yacht’s owner was Roxane, a famous fortune teller, and that she had been killed.

“Madame Roxane was murdered?!”

“Did you know her?” Kazuya asked.

Maurice did not answer.

Ned then spoke up. “I was an orphan, no family. I was in an orphanage until I turned eighteen. Then I worked and trained to be an actor, and fortunately, I was able to get on stage. Before I knew it, I was a little bit famous. And this week...” He paused. He then slowed down, unsure if he really had to tell them. “A bouquet of flowers and an invitation were delivered to the waiting room where I was performing. Sometimes I get them from die-hard fans. I thought I could use the breather, so I accepted it.” He cast his eyes down after speaking.

Julie explained herself next. “Like I told you earlier, my parents are wealthy people who own a coal mine. I grew up in a large mansion doing whatever I wanted.” Contrary to Ned, she talked fast. She rambled on, like she wanted to finish her story right away. “The other day, I found the invitation in my car, even though it was locked. I thought it was a little odd, but my birthday was coming up and I figured it was just a prank by my friends. So I came over, chuckling to myself. I couldn’t be more wrong, though.”

After hearing everyone’s story, Maurice hung his head, deep in thought. His brows furrowed, and he wore a grim look.

He then lifted his head and pointed at Ned and Julie. “It’s one of you, isn’t it?”

“Wh-What?! Of course not!”

Maurice glanced over at Victorique. "I can attest to this girl's identity. She's a daughter from a noble family. She wouldn't do this. Neither would her friend. And they're too young. Ten years ago, both of them would have been only five years old. There were no five-year-old Hares back then. They were all in their early teens."

"How can you be so sure? You only have their word to go on. She could just be some random kid!"

"Nonsense. I know a noble when I see one. The air around them is different from the common folk. As the daughter of someone who just struck it rich, you might not know this, but I'm a Viscount. I've been interacting with the elite for a long time. I can assure you that this child is of true noble blood."

"S-Struck it rich?!"

Julie lunged at the man, but Ned stopped her. "Don't!"

Maurice stared at them with disdain. "The Hares were orphans. I know a lowborn when I see one. An actor and a rich man's daughter. I wonder, which one of you is the filthy survivor?"

The man looked up at the ceiling and started laughing. Like a beast, Julie went berserk and tried to attack Maurice. Ned called Kazuya for assistance, and he quickly helped keep her in check.

Julie let out an animalistic snarl. "You're just as suspicious yourself, Maurice!"

"...What?"

Julie had stopped flailing about, so Ned and Kazuya let her go. She glared at Maurice with the dangerous, cornered look of a wounded beast. Maurice had his back against the wall, looking at Julie with frightened eyes.

"Maybe the Hare had parents," Julie said. "Or guardians. Someone who took care of them. Ever thought of that?"

"..."

"Ten years ago, you'd be in your mid-thirties. A child born in your twenties would be in their early teens then. The same age as the Hares, as you said."

"My daughter goes to a school for nobles."

"All this talk about you being a noble and a foreign affairs official is just you saying things. As long as you're on this ship, there's no way to confirm it. Maybe you're just a crazy parent who built this ridiculous ship to avenge

your dead child. That's right. Maybe you're a crazy father who lost his kid!"

"Ridiculous." Maurice guffawed. He glowered at Julie. "I will not stand for such slander!"

Looking at the man's face, Kazuya was convinced. Maurice was a nobleman. He had the pride and refined mannerism characteristic of the nobility that he had seen so much of since coming to this country. This man would not lie about his identity.

"That's right," Maurice said. "This young detective mentioned something. She said there was an extra person. I was close, so I could hear her. There were eleven of us at the dining room, and when we woke up in the lounge, there were twelve. One person more. The one who wasn't in the dining room is the culprit. They're blending in with the rest of us, watching us get scared to death while deep inside they're laughing."

"What?!"

"The actor was definitely in the dining room. It was so dark that I couldn't make out his face, but I heard him rambling on and on about some boring story from his career."

Ned's cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

Julie bit her lip and glared at Maurice.

"You, however, weren't there, were you, little lady?"

"I was there!" Julie snapped back.

"You have no proof."

"I could say the same about you. No one saw your face. So it's either me or you."

The two scowled at each other.

"Another thing, Maurice." Julie's voice was shaking with rage. "Why didn't you board the lifeboat?"

"B-Because..."

"All your buddies scrambled to get away from the ship and onto the boat. Weren't you the one who suggested the lifeboat? But when it was lowered, you alone didn't get in."

"B-Because you said it was dangerous!"

"So you, a nobleman, listened to a lowborn like me?"

This time Maurice pounced on her with clenched fists, breathing hard. Ned quickly inserted himself between them.

Julie gave a sudden jerk. “Ssh!” She put her index finger to her lips and strained her ears.

“What is it?” Ned asked.

“...Water.” Julie’s face scrunched up in horror. “I hear water!”

She opened the door and ran out into the hallway. She then stopped and listened carefully.

Splash. Splash. Splash.

There was a faint sound of water coming from down below. As she stood there dumbfounded, Maurice groaned, “A flood!”

He fell to his knees. Ned shook him by the shoulders. “What do you mean?! Hey!”

Maurice did not answer. Ned shook him back and forth. Maurice opened his tightly-closed eyes, his face contorted in fear.

“You drill small holes at the bottom of the ship to submerge it little by little, creating a time limit,” he said, finally.

“What...?”

“It was my idea...”

“What?!”

Maurice was silent for a moment, his shoulders shaking. After a while, he lifted his head.

“Quick, to the radio room!” he cried. “The ship’s sinking!”

Monologue 3

Children stood frozen in a bright corridor. I was standing in the middle of them, holding a body with a knife through its throat. For a while, no one moved or spoke.

Only nine kids remained. Huey and the Hungarian girl were gone.

“There’s a weapon here!” the German boy said. He was large for a fourteen-year-old. His near-adult-sized physique was shaking with rage.

He twisted Lee’s hand that she was hiding behind her back, and pushed her forward.

“Stop!” I cried.

“Take a good look. An actual weapon, and she’s holding it!” His intimidating voice, laced with a German accent, reverberated in the corridor.

Everyone gasped at what he showed. In Lee’s hand was a small knife, shaped like an elephant’s tusk. It gleamed coldly under the light.

“She did it,” the boy said bitterly. “She killed her!”

Lee tried to shake off his hand, dropping the knife in the process. The German boy bent down, still keeping his grip on her small hand, and picked it up.

Lee shook her head in denial, tears in the corner of her eyes.

Yang stepped forward. “Stop it!”

“You’re not the boss of me, chink.”

“What?!”

Another boy quickly stepped in front of the angry Yang. Large and muscular, he’d been with the German boy from the beginning and gave off a similar vibe. He was Austrian.

The Austrian boy grabbed Lee’s other hand. “If it weren’t for her, we wouldn’t be in any danger. She’s the one hiding a weapon. Bitch was just pretending to not understand a word!”

“You’re wrong!” I protested. “She really doesn’t understand a thing!” But they didn’t even spare me a glance.

The German boy struck the frozen Lee in the head as hard as he could. Her little head shook and her long black hair bounced in the air. Yang rushed to stop him, while the other kids just stared at the scene in stunned silence.

“Yeah. She was alone with Huey when he died. You’re the one who locked us in here, and you’re killing us one by one!”

“Well, not on my watch. We’ll be the ones to kill you!”

The two large boys started ganging up on Lee.

The situation was getting out of hand. Being trapped in here and seeing a dead body were making them lose it. Yang tried to stop them, but they were too big for him, and he ended up getting knocked back instead.

Then, the German boy raised a knife.

The other kids screamed.

He brought the knife down, aiming straight at Lee’s heart. Yang hurled himself at the boy. Someone else from the group of kids also called for the German boy to stop.

Thanks to Yang, the knife missed Lee’s heart, slipping past her side. The German boy’s full force landed not on Lee’s heart, but on the red carpet in the hallway. The floorboards made a crunching sound.

It seemed to be a very sharp knife. Bright blood spilled from the shallow wound on Lee’s side. The cut skin turned red, as though a flower had bloomed there.

Everyone was paralyzed.

Lee let out a short shriek before fainting.

The sight of blood brought the Austrian boy back to his senses, and he quickly pulled his hand away from Lee. The German boy, however, raised his knife again with bloodshot eyes.

Without thinking, I tossed the body I was holding aside. I opened the drawer in the cabinet, took out the pistol, and held it up with both hands.

“Get away from Lee!” I shouted. “Or I’ll shoot! ”

The German boy turned around. His hands froze, as if he had seen something he couldn’t believe. He then raised both hands in the air.

The other kids were staring at us in shock. The hallway was wrapped in silence.

I could feel my arms trembling as I held the gun. I didn’t know if I was doing the right thing or not. I just knew that I had to help Lee. I knew that

she was a kind and sweet girl, even if we couldn't communicate.

"Alex, calm down," Yang said in a low voice.

"Ahuh..."

"Where'd you get the gun?"

"In here."

I pointed to a shelf, drawing everyone's eyes to it.

"I realized it just now. I don't know why, but there are weapons on this ship. I think that's how Lee found the knife. I don't know if it was for self-defense or maybe she just wanted to let everyone know, but I think she just brought the knife she found."

"What?!"

"You two, get away from Lee. Yang, tend to Lee's wound."

Yang nodded and knelt down. He tore off his own shirt and stopped the bleeding on Lee's side.

"I'm not going to shoot," I told the two boys. They both had their hands up in the air. "I'm not going to do that. We have to stop doubting each other. Let's all work together and get to the radio room quick."

"N-No way!" the German boy protested in a shaky voice. He seemed stubborn. He pulled on the confused Austrian boy, and they walked away together.

"Hey..."

"You said there are weapons, right? Then we'll arm ourselves. Do you really expect me to trust a girl hiding a weapon?!"

He glared scornfully at the unconscious Lee, then opened every shelf in the corridor. They gradually moved away while searching for weapons.

When they were quite the distance away, one of them said, "Found it!"

They had turned the corner of the corridor and were no longer in sight.

Suddenly, a Turkish boy stood up. He had brown skin with long, supple arms and legs. He began growling about something, like he was angry. I couldn't understand him because of the language barrier, but he was probably saying that it was dangerous and that he would call them back. He pointed to the hallway, then to himself, nodded, and started running.

The Turkish boy's slender body turned the corner and disappeared.

The next moment...

There was a loud bang. The floor, walls, and air in the hallway seemed to vibrate. I saw the body of the boy who had just turned the corner

reappear, as if blown away, before falling on its back.

Silence.

A second later, screams.

Clutching the gun, I rushed toward the Turkish boy.

As I tried to help him up, I noticed a huge hole in his chest. For a moment, I saw the pattern of the floor carpet, but soon the blood slowly seeping from the hole into the carpet blotted it out.

He was shot with a very powerful gun. The Turkish boy passed away with a slightly angry look on his face. He must have died before he even realized what had happened to him.

I looked up and saw the German boy and the Austrian boy running away. The former was carrying what looked like a machine gun.

Three died. Huey, the Hungarian girl, and the Turkish boy.

I carried Lee, who was unconscious from the pain and blood loss, and moved. We trudged down the corridor toward the bow to get to the radio room.

There were six of us left. The Chinese Yang, the dark-haired Lee, and myself. Then there was a large Italian boy with a chiseled face, a skinny American boy with curly hair that reminded me of an angel, and a petite French girl with a long brunette braid.

We all walked in silence, wearing horrified looks.

The lower floor was dim and somewhat eerie compared to the luxurious upper level. The doorknobs and the lamps in the corridors seemed to have been replaced with slightly more plain ones and with practical designs.

The French girl walking ahead of us let out a disappointed grunt. She turned around and shook her head.

The hallway on this floor was blocked as well. We all started walking toward the stairs to go down one more floor.

“Alex,” Yang said. “That was brave of you.”

“No, you were braver.”

“Do you still have that gun from earlier?”

I nodded.

“Let me see,” he said, then took the weapon. “This is the safety. You can’t shoot unless you remove it.”

“I see.” I gave a nod. “Wait, so even if I pulled the trigger earlier, it wouldn’t have fired?”

“Yeah. But I knew you wouldn’t shoot.”

Our eyes met.

Yang smiled, his eyes narrowing like threads.

We went down the stairs to the lower level.

The five of us walked down the hallway, which seemed even darker than the one above. Lee was still unconscious on my back. I wondered if her bleeding had stopped, but we had to move forward for now.

We proceeded down the corridor, praying that there was no wall blocking our path.

The floor was filled with second-class cabins and the engineers’ dining areas. Many of the rooms were old and shabby. The corridor was darkly lit, and the carpet, which had originally been a deep red, had turned dull and shaggy.

Suddenly, the French girl started mumbling about something completely unrelated to our situation. She talked about the town where she grew up. The subject caught me off-guard.

“We raised sheep,” she said. “We were poor, so we didn’t have that many. My family made cheese from the sheep’s milk and ate it. We were all healthy back then. I had a friend from a rich family, and I used to play in their vineyard. Good times...”

The braided girl, dressed in rags like a boy, looked quite cute upon closer look, but now there was fear on her pallid face.

The American boy picked up where she left off, forcing himself to speak.

“Ugh, sheep cheese is too stinky, it’s inedible,” he said. He sounded as cute as a little girl before her voice changed.

The French girl argued back. “That’s what makes it delicious.”

“Where I lived, there were corn fields all over the place. Do you like corn? Back then, we ate corn every day, making soup out of it or stewing it with meat. Ah, the memories...”

Yang also began telling his story in a gentle, mellow voice. When his father was alive, the two of them traveled together. After he was orphaned, he worked as an unloader at a port to survive. He said his life of traveling was fun.

The Italian boy let out a groan. "This is not the time for such stories. Keep them to yourselves."

The mood turned sour, and we kept our mouth shut. We continued walking in silence for a while.

"There's no killer among us," the American boy suddenly said. "Don't you think so?"

Everyone stared at his face in surprise.

"I've been thinking," he continued in his girly voice. "It's true that it seems like we're the only ones on this ship, and there are weapons hidden everywhere. But I don't think there's a killer among us."

"Yeah!" The French girl nodded. "I think so, too. I don't know why, but there has to be someone else who brought us here. They destroyed the rudder and are enjoying watching us get scared. That's why they built this wall in the hallway. It's not our doing."

The chiseled Italian boy interjected. "Then how did Huey die? There was no one but us back there. When Yang shone his flashlight, there was no one there but Lee. And that knife that went through her throat..." The memory made his voice tremble. "If that Hungarian girl met someone other than us, wouldn't she have at least screamed? She was stabbed without uttering a single word. That's because it was one of us who killed her."

"Uhm, well..." Unable to say anything back, the American boy hung his head.

Silence descended.

Yang lifted his head. "Alex, do you remember when we went to the deck?"

"Uh, yeah."

"That time, the Hungarian girl got a cut on her cheek, didn't she?"

I remembered. When we went out on deck, she approached the railing and tried to scream for help.

"Something just grazed my face. When I stepped on this area, something flew from over there and into the water."

Yang nodded. "She stepped on something. Then an arrow or something probably flew at her and grazed her cheek. There was no one in the direction she was pointing."

"So what does that mean?" The Italian boy leaned forward.

Wearing a dubious look, Yang said, “Maybe the culprit set up traps on the ship beforehand. Maybe she didn’t get stabbed, but instead the knife flew at her when she passed by it.”

“Seriously...?”

The six of us crouched on the floor to be safe as we opened cabin doors and moved furniture. In one room, as soon as we opened the door, an arrow from a bow gun flew at us. The Italian boy entered the room and cautiously searched everywhere. But no one was there.

In another area, a hammer fell from the side, nearly hitting the French girl. A large chunk of iron buzzed past her nose as she rolled over after being pushed by Yang.

The trap was set up so that if we stepped on a particular spot on the floor, the hammer would start moving.

Not every room or corner of the corridors had traps. But I felt madness and malice. We walked close together to keep warm and protect each other.

After a while, the French girl gave a jerk.

“What’s wrong?”

“...I hear water,” she replied.

We all listened carefully. But I couldn’t hear anything. I turned to ask the French girl, but Yang shushed me.

I swallowed my words.

Several seconds later...

Splash. Splash. Splash.

I could hear the faint sound of water.

What’s going on?

As I stood there puzzled, Yang exclaimed, “The ship’s getting flooded!”

“You’re kidding!”

“Little by little, water is pouring in from the bottom of the ship. It will probably sink in the morning. We have to hurry! To the bow, quick!”

We looked at each other and nodded.

Screams rang out through the ship.

We ran as fast as we could in the direction the voices came from.

After turning the corner, we found ourselves by the elevator hall, illuminated by a white incandescent light. The lower we descended, the darker and dirtier the corridors and cabin became, yet the elevator was unusually bright.

The voice came from here, but there was no one in sight.

As I looked around in confusion, a thick arm suddenly appeared and grabbed me by the hair, pulling me hard.

I screamed. Then I heard the owner's voice by my ear.

"Help!"

A familiar voice with a German accent.

I turned around and saw arms reaching toward me through the bars of the elevator. Inside were the German and Austrian boys. Their large bodies trembled as they stretched their arms toward us.

"Wh-What happened?!"

"Help! I-It's locked!"

I set Lee down on the floor and dashed to the elevator. I shook the bars, but it was locked from the outside. The others asked them questions, but they were too scared to speak properly.

"Th-There's a ghost!"

"It took the gun from us and threw us in here!"

"Oh." Yang turned around. "Alex, the gun!"

When I took out the gun, the two boys inside screamed in fear.

"Stand back!" I aimed at the lock and pulled the trigger.

A sharp jolt ran from my arms to my shoulders. My ears went numb from the loud bang.

The first shot missed. I immediately fired another.

Clank!

The lock broke and came off the bars.

"Good!"

I felt deeply relieved. The boys' faces also softened.

Yang tried to open the bars, when suddenly, the elevator began to descend.

The boys' faces contorted in fear. Their eyes widened like their eyeballs were about to pop out, and they stretched out their thick arms toward us. They grabbed me by the hair again. I screamed out. They were screaming too.

I felt a dull pain in my scalp and eyes as strands of my hair were pulled out from their roots.

The last thing I saw were the faces of the two boys, behind iron bars, gripped by fear and fury. A rattle, and the iron cage descended rapidly into

the abyss.

Their ear-splitting screams quickly grew more and more distant.

And then a splash from down below.

The elevator had been destroyed. Yang and I desperately tried to raise it, but it wouldn't move. We hit it repeatedly, crying out as we did.

The American boy gently laid his hand on my shoulder.

I turned around, crying, and quietly shook my head. Behind him, the French girl was also weeping silently.

"They're gone," he said.

"It can't be...!"

"It's been more than ten minutes. I think they drowned."

The Italian boy roared like a beast as he pounded on the wall.

We couldn't stay there forever. The ship was slowly being flooded. I carried the unconscious Lee on my back and started walking with the rest of the kids.

We trod carefully, checking for traps. We found the wall again and returned to the stairs. The lower we went, the darker it became, and the more shabby the corridors. The sound of water was getting closer and closer.

"You said it was locked from the outside," Yang murmured.

I nodded. "A ghost did it, apparently."

"I wonder what that means."

"Who knows?"

"All the traps we found were unmanned," Yang continued. "But that one was different. There's someone else out there. Hiding in this ship and hunting us. It's the only possibility."

We plodded down the poorly-lit hallway, barely able to see our feet.

No one talked. All we could hear was our own footsteps.

Suddenly, Lee let out a groan.

"Lee? Are you awake?"

She opened her eyes and winced in pain. She then looked at me and gave a weak smile, as if to say thank you.

For a while, Lee remained silent as I carried her. But then she suddenly started screaming and flailing. I quickly set her down on the floor.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Lee pointed at her neck.

“Oh...”

Her pendant was gone. A pink enamel pendant in the shape of a heart. Lee’s precious lucky charm.

“Now is not the time for that,” Yang said. “You can just buy a different one. If you make it out of here alive, you can do whatever you want. For now, be patient.”

Lee shook her head again and again, tears in her jet-black eyes.

Ignoring her, Yang used his own shirt to stop the bleeding from Lee’s wound.

It looked like it would take a while.

Suddenly, I remembered Lee’s warm smile when I first woke up on the ship. My heart ached when I thought about this girl who had been next to me and cared for me. She let me touch her precious heart pendant to give me strength.

She was now pale, silently enduring the pain.

I rose to my feet.

Yang looked at me curiously. “What’s the matter, Alex?”

“I’m gonna get it back.”

“What...?”

“The pendant. It’s probably around where Huey collapsed. When those guys started fussing about the knife, I don’t think she was wearing the pendant anymore.”

“Alex!” Yang tried to stop me. “It’s dangerous. Stay here with us.”

The others chimed in as well.

“He’s right. She can just buy another pendant!”

“It’s dangerous. Let’s stay together.”

“We should refrain from doing anything unnecessary.”

I looked at Lee’s ashen face. I wasn’t sure how long she would last. I wanted to find the pendant and give it to her. Lee and I didn’t speak the same language. I couldn’t tell her how grateful I was for her kindness.

“It was on a landing, so it won’t take long. I’ll be right back.”

I started running. I could hear their voices calling me from behind.

I climbed the dark stairs, illuminating my feet with the flashlight that Yang had taken from the elevator. I took one step at a time, careful not to step on any trap.

The white tiles of the stairs gleamed coldly in the round light. Fear gripped me. What if I would never see them again? Would I have to wander this ship alone? The thought brought tears in the corners of my eyes. As if to ward off the dark thoughts, I continued to climb, step by step.

Just when I thought I was almost at the spot where Huey had collapsed, I stepped on something round and bouncy and almost tripped. I thought it was a trap. A chill ran down my spine. I looked down at my feet and saw not a trap, but a small ball. A tennis ball.

What's it doing here? I wondered as I picked it up.

I went up the stairs again.

...And gulped.

The body was gone. There was nothing where Huey was supposed to be lying. No signs that there was even a body there. It had vanished without a trace.

I sank to the floor, stunned. The light from the flashlight showed a pink, heart-shaped enamel pendant at my feet. It was Lee's treasured pendant. The moment I saw it, I felt relieved, as if I became connected to her.

I picked it up and squeezed it tight. I couldn't understand what was happening. Tears formed in my eyes.

Where'd the body go?

Who hid it and why?

Are there other people on this ship besides us?

Chapter 4: The Hares and the Hound

The five of them plodded down the hallway in silence.

Victorique and Kazuya were walking side by side at the back. In front of them was Julie Guile, her red dress trailing behind her. Her long raven hair bobbed from side to side with each step. Ned Baxter was farthest ahead, while Maurice was alone, walking fast, away from the group.

The soft red carpet wrapped around their feet with each step. It was luxurious, but difficult to walk on. The overly ornate and ostentatious lamps shone brightly on all of them.

Ned stopped. “Wh-What’s this?!”

Everybody stopped and looked at it. A black wall was blocking the path to the bow. Every corridor on the floor was blocked by the wall, preventing them from proceeding any further.

Maurice clicked his tongue. “It’s the same from ten years ago.”

Ned and Julie closed in on him, and he began to explain with a dark look on his face.

“It would be boring if the Hares could easily reach the radio room. We had to reduce their numbers by killing them with traps, or letting them find weapons and kill each other.”

“Why do that?” Julie asked.

Maurice didn’t bother answering.

After a brief silence, he sighed. “We need to go down three floors. There should be a wall blocking the corridor on the floor below and the next one. If this was the Queen Berry, that is.”

They started back down the hallway to look for the stairs.

Kazuya shot Victorique a glance. She had been silent for a while, but he heard a faint gasp from her. Worried, he peered at her face.

Beads of sweat dotted the pale forehead of the doll-like girl.

“Are you tired?” Kazuya asked.

Victorique didn’t answer.

“Do your feet hurt? Are you hungry? Oh, your stuff must be heavy. I’ll carry it for you.”

“...I’m fine.”

“Come now. No need to be shy. That’s not like you.”

“Listen here, Kujou.” Victorique looked up. Her cheeks were puffed out like a sulking child. She probably didn’t intend to look as adorable as a squirrel with its cheek crammed with nuts. “Your managing me is infuriating!”

“What?! How am I managing you?! I’m just worried, you stubborn sore loser!”

“You’re the stubborn one!”

“No, you!”

Kazuya took Victorique’s bag from her, grabbed her small hand with his other hand, and started walking.

Julie watched them in astonishment. Ned pretended not to notice.

As they walked, Kazuya spoke to Victorique. A lot of questions were popping up in his mind, and he needed to talk to someone.

“Hey, Victorique. What in the world is going on here?”

No reply.

He looked at her. She seemed to be listening to him, so he resumed talking, feeling relieved.

“What happened ten years ago on the Queen Berry? Why were children our age put on the ship? What on earth happened onboard? And why, ten years later, did they build this replica to recreate the incident?”

Victorique didn’t answer. She just kept walking along with Kazuya.

“Who in the world is doing this and why?”

Kazuya recalled the dinner at the huge dining area. The dark room. The guide who left by boat. An orange lamp moving away on the surface of the dark sea. The eleven guests seated in the dining room. They were moved to the lounge after the drug in their food put them to sleep. Someone who wasn’t at the dining table had joined them. Could they be the mastermind behind this bloody reenactment?

“Ned was there for sure.”

“You were sitting on his lap, yes,” Victorique finally said.

“Uh, yeah... In that case, Julie or Maurice is the twelfth guest. In terms of age, the younger Julie is more suspicious. She would have been in her

early teens ten years ago. About the same age as the kids on the ship.” Kazuya was lost in thought. “But then, why did Ned get an invitation as well? Apparently, Maurice was the one who put the kids on the ship back then. That’s why he was invited, and why he was almost killed. But what about Ned? He would have been in his early teens ten years ago. He would have been a victim.”

“Kujou, you’ve been mumbling about nothing but the obvious.” Victorique seemed genuinely appalled.

“But there’s so many things I don’t understand.”

“...”

“Oh, right. Maybe Ned’s a culprit too, and he’s working with Julie. No, wait. If that’s the case, they wouldn’t have to go through all this trouble. They would just kill Maurice.”

“Yet another obvious observation.”

“D-Damn it... Oh, by the way, about Madame Roxane’s murder. She was invited to this ship, but was murdered, and the maid who killed her escaped.”

“That is correct.”

“So, uhh...”

“Yes?”

“Hmm... I don’t know.”

“Your chaos is really boring,” she mumbled in a clearly bored tone.

Dejected, Kazuya continued walking mutely with her hand in his.

Eventually they reached the stairs. Its glistening white tiles were only darkly lit for some reason, like darkness itself had enveloped the place.

In contrast, the elevator hall nearby was well-lit. The inside of the steel cage was also bright, and seemed safer. But when Kazuya pointed toward the elevator and suggested they take it, Ned turned pale and rejected the idea.

“Let’s take the stairs,” he said. “It’s safer this way... I think.”

Kazuya and Victorique exchanged glances.

Victorique shrugged. “So he says.”

They descended down the stairs carefully, slowly, and when they’d covered quite the distance, there came a short clang.

Maurice let out a muffled shriek. The rest jumped, feeling as if someone had grabbed their chest.

“Wh-What’s wrong, old man?!”

“Th-This...” Maurice’s trembling fingers pointed at something in the darkness.

They all stared at it. An arrow from a bow gun zipped past Maurice’s face and bore itself into the wall. A closer examination revealed an inconspicuous button on the tile floor. He probably stepped on it.

Slowly, Maurice’s eyes became crossed as he stared at the arrow.

“S-Screw you! Y-You did this!” He shot the others a scornful glare.

“Y-You all right?” Ned asked, but his voice only agitated the man even more.

“All right, my foot! The Hare among you set that trap for me! Or maybe you’re all in on it... You’re all trying to kill me!

“Just drop it already.” Julie scowled. Fiddling with her pendant, she added, “We wouldn’t have stopped you from getting into the lifeboat if we wanted you dead. Can you stop accusing us?”

They held each other’s gaze.

“Victorique,” Kazuya called softly to the girl standing next to him. His voice echoed in the tense silence. “You’d better watch out for traps too. I’ll be keeping an eye out for them too, of course.”

His earnest and gentle voice softened Julie’s stern expression, but what Victorique said next brought a puzzled look to her face.

“I don’t need to worry about traps,” she replied confidently.

Kazuya was taken aback. Sensing something from her words, the three adults looked at her.

Ned walked over, a dark look on his face. “What do you mean by that?”

His intimidating voice and demeanor did not affect Victorique one bit. “This ship is designed to kill adults.” She sounded as calm as ever. “That’s why it’s safe.”

“But traps don’t choose their targets. If you carelessly open a door, or a wrong step or touch, even you’d be in trouble.”

Victorique cocked her head and smiled. She looked like an angel. “All the traps are set to match the height of adults. Specifically, they are designed to pierce the brains of people who are about a hundred and seventy to a hundred and eighty centimeters tall.”

Kazuya let out a surprised grunt. *She’s right*, he thought. The arrow that killed the first man and the one that just flew by were all set up at that

height. Which means...

Even if Victorique, who was only about 140 centimeters tall, triggered a trap, it would only fly far above her head.

“Kujou, you might want to stoop down a little too,” Victorique said innocently, like she was just stating a fact she knew. “Your brain might be safe, but you might lose a bit of your head.”

“M-My head?!”

Kazuya bent forward before he resumed walking. He was holding Victorique’s hand much tighter than before, watching her closely to see if she was tired.

Julie observed them from behind.

The stairs were as dark as ever. Since they had to keep their eyes peeled for traps, they made slow progress. It felt like they had been descending for a long time now.

“Hey,” Julie called softly from behind. “You’re a nice boy.”

Kazuya looked up. He inclined his head, wondering what she was talking about.

Julie cast a glance at Victorique. “You’re trying so hard to protect the girl,” she said in a teasing tone.

Kazuya flushed. “N-Not really... Besides, she always has a bone to pick with me.”

“She wants your attention.”

Kazuya could not believe it one bit. “Can you elaborate?”

“She’s a girl like any other. She has a sharp tongue, but I think she trusts you. She lets you carry her things, and look, she never lets go of your hand.”

Kazuya focused on his hand. She was right. Despite Victorique’s grumbling, she was squeezing Kazuya’s hand tight. He wondered if she really trusted him. Or was she feeling nervous of the current situation?

There wasn’t the slightest hint of fear from her words and attitude, but her thoughts seemed to course through her hand. Kazuya squeezed her hand back.

“Let me tell you something, young man. People like her never give you their stuff unless they really trust you. You can bet on it.”

“Before coming here, I opened her bag without her permission and told her to reduce her luggage.”

“And if it were anyone else, she wouldn’t have let them get away with it. She wouldn’t go on the trip. She’d just turn around and head back home.”

Kazuya mulled it over. Julie watched him admiringly.

Feeling embarrassed, he said, “I just... feel responsible for our current situation.”

“Oh, are you the culprit?”

“Please don’t even joke about it. What I mean is...” Kazuya’s face clouded over.

It was him who brought Victorique along on this trip. As far as he knew, she had always been in the library’s botanical garden, a cozy skylighted room on the top floor that the king built for him and his mistress. Victorique was a mysterious being, like a spirit or a tiny deity that lived in St. Marguerite, skimming through books and occasionally solving cases from the world below.

She spent each day of her life in peace, surrounded by wonder and mystery.

And yet, he invited her to a weekend trip and brought her to such a dangerous place. If something happened to her, it would be on him.

The only thing she had was her intellect. Her body was so small and frail. He was only a helpless kid, but he wanted to at least protect her.

These thoughts were the exact reason why people called him straight-laced and overly-serious. His older brothers and father, who was strict with himself and others, constantly reminded him to protect those who were weaker than him, even if he himself was powerless.

He never thought he could do it, that he was far from being a heroic character. It was simply impossible. But right here, right now, he didn’t want to show any sign of weakness to Julie. He had his pride.

“You’re a fine young man,” Julie teased. She wasn’t aware of what was going through his mind.

“Well, I’m the third son of an imperial soldier.”

“Or a baby boy.” Julie giggled. Kazuya blushed, then she added, “I like kids like you. Let’s get out of here alive, yeah?”

Her remark sounded innocent, but it made Kazuya embarrassed nevertheless. He clammed up, not sure what to say.

“We made it,” Ned, who was walking ahead, uttered with relief.

Finally, they reached their destination floor.

Feeling at ease, Kazuya turned to Victorique. “Just a little longer now.” Suddenly, Maurice, who had been following Ned, let out a yelp.

Kazuya and Julie shared a look, and went down the stairs.

As they walked down the last two steps, there was a splashing sound. Through their footwear, they could feel themselves wading through water. The pale incandescent lamps showed seawater.

The floor was already flooded, murky water coming up to their knees.

The level, with its cargo hold and engine room, was very different from the one above. It was like being in a giant pipe. The corridor looked bleak and unsanitary. The dirty water churned little waves. It was a hopeless sight.

Ned and Maurice exchanged weary looks.

“What the hell is going on?” Maurice wailed. “We can’t get to the bow like this!”

Ned clutched his head and let out a low groan.

Julie came down the stairs late and started plodding down the hallway, knee-deep in water.

While the two men only stared at her, she turned around to Kazuya. “What are you doing? Move it! We can make it if we hurry.”

Kazuya hesitated for moment, then nodded firmly. “C-Coming!” He bent down. “Get on,” he told Victorique.

For a second, Victorique was bewildered.

“Get on already!” Julie yelled.

“Quick! We gotta hurry!”



Victorique gave a series of low grunts before reluctantly climbing onto Kazuya's back. It felt like a dog or cat hopped on his back, too light for a human being. For all her hesitation, her slim arms' grip around Kazuya's neck was tight.

"O-Ow! You're choking me."

"...Tough it out."

"No way. You're gonna kill me."

While they argued, Kazuya started trudging through the water. He could hear Maurice and Ned following behind.

"Thank goodness!" Julie exclaimed after a while. "The hallway here isn't blocked. Guys, we're on the bow now. Upstairs, quick! I'm going ahead!"

Kazuya quickened his pace. Feeling delighted, Victorique stretched herself and started swinging her legs. She almost fell into the water, so Kazuya put more strength into his arms. Whether she knew how tough he had it or not, Victorique continued swinging her legs happily.

They reached the stairs on the ship's bow side, and slowly began climbing, carefully avoiding any traps.

"How did this happen?" Maurice mumbled. "There's a Hare among them. I won't let my guard down. I know!" He bolted to the upper floor.

They were still below the first floor, which was probably why the lights were dimmer and the carpet in the hallway old and shaggy. Originally red, it had darkened and begun to fade from the middle where people often walked. The lamps were practical in design, scarcely ornamented, and the planks used for the walls had noticeable knots.

Maurice hastily opened every door he could find. There were endless third-class cabins with quadruple bunk beds crammed to the ceiling.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Ned asked curiously.

"If this ship is a replica of the old Box, then there should be one around here. Yes... found it!"

Maurice's face warped triumphantly.

Ned tried to get closer, but quickly stopped with a yelp.

Maurice faced them, holding a gun. Trembling hands gripped a chunk of metal that glimmered black as darkness.

With a squeal, Ned rushed behind the others. Maurice pointed the muzzle in their direction. The corner of his mouth quirked up.

“There were a lot of weapons hidden in the ship. In drawers, in vases, under carpets. Everywhere. This is one of them.”

“But why...?” Julie asked.

She regarded Maurice with a sorrowful look, her hands shaking. She was on the verge of tears. Maurice’s face was expressionless as he stared back at her. And as though it was the most natural thing to do, he began speaking with authority.

“To kill each other.”

“What do you mean...?”

The man shrugged. “Some were killed by traps. Others found weapons and killed each other. Things went according to plan. There was no point in having many survivors, you see.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“There’s no need for you to know. Also...” Maurice grinned. “There was a Hound.”

“A Hound?”

“Yes, a Hound.”

Maurice shut his mouth, then slowly pulled the slide of the gun.

Click!

There was an ominous sound of a bullet sliding into the chamber.

“Die, Hare!”

Kazuya saw that Maurice was pointing the muzzle at Victorique. “M-Mr. Maurice! Why her?! You said it yourself. Victorique isn’t the culprit, that she’s a real noble!”

“I don’t know what’s what anymore. Fortunately, I have six bullets. I’ll kill you all and get out of this ship alone!”

“What?!”

“This ship is sinking soon anyway. All the evidence will be sitting on the ocean floor. Just like ten years ago!”

Kazuya stood in front of Victorique, face to face with the gun’s muzzle. He began to break out in a cold sweat. He gritted his teeth, his legs trembling.

Victorique poked him from behind. “Kujou, what are you doing?” she asked nonchalantly.

“I-I-Isn’t it obvious? I-I-I’m protecting you from the evil bullets!”

“You will die.”

“M-M-Maybe. B-B-But you will live.”

“Makes sense.”

“I-I’m the one who invited you outside. I have to get you back alive. As the third son of an Imperial soldier, I have that responsibility.”

The image of his solemn father, always with his back straight, and his two older brothers, who looked exactly like their father, flashed in his mind. One sunny afternoon, they took him to the neighborhood dojo they attended. Kazuya was suddenly thrown to the floor by an adult. Lacking the courage to face them, Kazuya crawled on the dojo’s white tatami floor, tears welling in his eyes. A boy, on the verge of crying. He felt sad and frustrated. He remembered the disappointed looks on his brothers’ faces as they stared at the failure that he was.

“Spoiled because he’s the youngest,” someone had muttered back then. It must have been one of the grownups watching. The casual remark left a lasting pain in his heart.

“S-So...” He looked at her with a serious face.

Victorique’s big, green eyes regarded him.

For the first time, Kazuya saw astonishment on her face. Every time he told her about some strange incident, she happily jumped at the mystery—the chaos, so to speak. She would look a little surprised every time.

But the expression she had now was completely different. She looked genuinely shocked, as if she had found something unusual and was observing it intently.

“Kujou, are you perhaps a good person?” she asked.

“What...? Are you complimenting me?”

“No.”

“Are you mocking me, then?”

“I am simply stating a fact. What are you getting all worked up about?”

Kazuya was getting pissed.

Bang!

A gunshot rang out.

Kazuya instinctively hunched over and covered Victorique. He closed his eyes tightly as he let out a yelp.

Memories of his life flashed through his mind. His childhood—growing up watching his brilliant brothers, studying hard to be just like them. His

departure to study abroad. The days he spent at St. Marguerite Academy. And the fateful, irreversible, shocking encounter with Victorique.

Huh?

Kazuya wasn't dead.

When he slowly opened his eyes, he saw Victorique twisting around.

"I can't breathe," she said. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"I just saved your life! How about a thank you?!" Kazuya let go of Victorique.

Maurice was lying on his back with a black hole on his forehead. He had died with a shocked look on his face.

Kazuya turned around and saw Julie on one knee, holding a small pistol. The hem of her red dress was open, revealing a bit of her radiant bare legs.

Wearing a blank expression, she lowered the gun and stood up.

"I found one too," she explained herself. "It was hidden behind a lamp on the wall. I didn't know why it was there, so I didn't say anything."

Ned approached Maurice's body with a dark look. He picked up the gun and threw it toward the bottom of the stairs, to the rising seawater.

After a splash, the gun made one ominous bubbling sound before sinking.

Ned looked back at Julie. "Throw your gun, too."

"What?!"

"We already suspect each other as it is. Having a gun will only make us kill each other. I threw it away. You should, too."

"But..."

"Unless you have a reason for wanting to carry a weapon?"

Julie clicked her tongue. She tossed the small gun at the bottom of the stairs. *Splash.*

She clicked her tongue once more. "Let's go. To the radio room."

As she resumed climbing the stairs, her handbag slipped from her hand. Victorique picked it up.

Oh? Kazuya cocked his head. Was Victorique kind enough to pick up something that someone else dropped?

Not having any intention of handing it over properly, she tossed the handbag to Julie. It flew softly in the air. Julie caught it and started up the stairs again.

The three of them followed suit.

With each step up the stairs, water dripped from their wet clothes.

Kazuya cast Victorique a sidelong glance. She was the only one who stayed dry, but her fine lace, frills, and silk socks were now blackened with dirt. He felt both sorry and ashamed. Victorique—ever dignified, revered, and awe-inspiring—was always calmly leafing through books in the library's garden. Now she was in a sinking ship, covered in filth.

Kazuya squeezed her hand tight.

Victorique looked at him, bewildered. "I've been wondering," she said.

"About what?"

"You were wailing about being the third son of an imperial soldier."

"I was, yes."

"Is there any special significance to being the third son?"

"...Excuse me?!"

Kazuya shook off Victorique's hand. His enraged expression took her by surprise.

"Wh-What are you angry about?"

"Good person this, third son that. Are you trying to pick a fight?!"

"N-No, I'm not. I was simply stating a fact. My brain perceived it as a fragment of chaos."

"I may be the third son, but I'll have you know, my academic record is better than my brothers'."

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"In your country, are brilliant third sons promoted to eldest?" she asked.

"No... It was just pride. My brothers always got preferential treatment, so I thought I'd fight back by putting my nose to the grindstone."

But Kazuya felt that all of his efforts went down the drain the day he was knocked down at the dojo. This was also the reason why he jumped at the chance to quit military academy and study at Sauville. He completed the paperwork before his family, including his loving mother and sister, could stop him, packed his belongings, and boarded a ship. It was as if he was running away from his country, his family, himself.

Now he was here.

"Hmm..." Victorique nodded. After a momentary silence, she said in a soft tone, "The nobility in this country is the same. The eldest son succeeds as head of the family."

Victorique's face took on an odd expression again. She looked up at Kazuya, as though she was observing something unusual. "Pride, huh?" she murmured.

"...Hmm?"

"Kujou, you're not only a good person. You're also honest."

"What?"

"You can admit to being proud. You have a simple and beautiful soul."

"Is that a compliment? Or a roundabout way of saying I'm stupid?"

Victorique regarded Kazuya curiously. She then turned her face away and fell silent. Her cheeks were puffed up like a squirrel with its mouth full of nuts. It was the face she made when she was sulking.

Their back and forth could just be Victorique's way of complimenting Kazuya, or perhaps she was trying to thank him for protecting her. Either way, she was simply expressing her feelings in a way. Meanwhile, Kazuya kept mumbling to himself.

"How silly," Victorique said sourly. "I'm simply stating a fact. Verbalizing the reconstructed fragment of chaos." She went silent once more, leaving Kazuya stumped.

Victorique had suddenly turned grumpy. Kazuya thought she was mad at him, though he didn't exactly know why.

The four of them walked up the stairs in silence.

Even in the dark, Ned was still deftly throwing and catching the tennis ball. He turned onto the dark landing and slowly disappeared.

The next instant, there was a thud, followed by what sounded like a yelp.

Kazuya and Julie shared looks.

"...Ned?" Julie called gingerly.

There was no answer.

"What's wrong?" Kazuya asked.

The stairwell was silent.

Kazuya and Julie looked at each other again, then ran up the stairs. As they stepped onto the poorly-lit landing, an unexpected scene greeted them.

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There was no answer.

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Ned was lying on the floor, dead.

Kazuya cried out and rushed toward Ned.

The man’s legs were pointed in Kazuya’s direction. His right hand was hidden under his body, and his left hand was stretched out, palm on his hip like he was standing at attention.

Kazuya took his left hand and checked for a pulse.

There was none.

How?! Why?! What happened?! Was it a trap? A trap set up here?

“K-Kujou...” Victorique called in a low, husky voice.

Kazuya looked over his shoulder and saw Victorique looking at him with an expression of genuine worry, which was unusual for her.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Come here.”

“Hold on. He’s dead. We need to find out what kind of trap did this to him.”

“Just come here, Kujou,” she insisted.

Her tone annoyed Kazuya. “Can you stop being so selfish?”

“I’m scared. Please, I need you by my side. I’m begging you.”

Kazuya was flabbergasted. One knee on the floor, he studied Victorique’s face.

She was staring at him with her usual imperious expression. It was as if she was telling him to get up quick. It wasn’t like her to say what she just said.

Kazuya was confused for a moment, then he decided that Victorique was lying.

She’s not scared. No way. She’s definitely lying. She would not beg me for anything.

He gulped. *I get it! She wants me to move. She wants me to get away from Ned's body!*

Kazuya stood up and walked back to Victorique.

He glanced to his side. Julie was standing frozen on the spot. She had her palms over her mouth, and her eyes were wide in disbelief.

"It can't be... It can't be..." she mumbled. "It's the same. It's the same as back then! What's going on?!"

Watching Julie, Kazuya whispered to Victorique, "What's wrong?"

"Listen close," she said, tension in her voice. "Once we make it upstairs, we hide. We must look for weapons. They seem to be all over the ship."

"What...?"

Wearing a hard look, she muttered cryptic words, "It's three against one. But I doubt two kids and a woman can beat one grown man. Letting her throw away the gun was a mistake. Unfortunately, it's too late for regrets."

"What are you talking about?" Julie asked in a whisper. "What's going to happen?"

Victorique looked up. Her emerald eyes widened and quivered with fear. She moved her small, pale lips. "We'll get killed."

"What...?"

Kazuya was about to say something, but he shut his mouth. *Let's just do as she says*, he told himself. He urged the frozen Julie to move and slowly walked past the corpse and the landing.

"Run!" Victorique hissed.

Kazuya squeezed Victorique's hand tight.

They were now on the upper level. The floor was covered with a luxurious, soft carpet, and ornate lamps shone on the walls. They entered the nearest cabin, a spacious reading room for first-class passengers. A glittering chandelier hung above, and extravagant bookshelves lined the walls. Watching for traps, they thoroughly searched the bookshelves, drawers, and under the carpet.

Kazuya found two small brass knuckles in a drawer on the shelf. He put them in both hands. Then he turned around and looked at Julie. She was holding a large paper knife, breathing heavily.

Their eyes met. Julie put her index finger to her lips as if to say, "Be quiet." Kazuya nodded.

Silence descended.

Kazuya's heart was beating faster and faster. His temples were throbbing.

Several seconds passed, and nothing happened.

Kazuya and Julie glanced at each other, puzzled. Kazuya turned behind him to ask Victorique what was going on, when the door opened silently.

Standing there was Ned Baxter, who was supposed to be dead.



Ned was holding a large axe in his right hand.

Wearing a blank expression, he looked like a different person from a moment ago. The temperature in the room seemed to drop rapidly.

Ned looked from left to right and spotted Julie standing by the wall, glaring at him. He sauntered toward her. Ned swung his axe, and Julie brandished her knife.

“What are you doing?!” she cried. “Get out of here! Get to the radio room and call for help!”

Ned slowly turned around and found Kazuya and Victorique. His eyes were dark and hollow, like two caverns. As he regarded Victorique, they began to lit up.

“It’s a girl,” he said. “A Hare!”

“What?!”

“Must hunt Hare... I’m a Hound, after all!” He raised his axe and leapt forward.

Ned was coming straight for Victorique. Kazuya pushed her to the floor and hit Ned on the side of his head as hard as he could.

Despite the huge difference in their size, the brass knuckles in his hands gave Kazuya’s punch a surprising amount of power. Ned fell flat on his back.

Julie rushed toward Kazuya and rubbed his head. “Great job, kid.”

“Correction. Third son of an imperi—”

“Yeah, yeah. Third son whatever. Let’s get out of here!”

Julie took the axe. As the trio exited the room, they pushed a large cabinet in the hallway in front of the door to block it.

They ran up the stairs. Seconds later, they heard the sound of Ned getting up and ramming the door.

They climbed the stairs, heading straight for the deck. It was gradually turning bright.

Kazuya was running with Victorique’s small body in his arms. She was staring curiously at Ned’s blood on the brass knuckles.

Julie caught up to them. She was racing up the stairs with both hands clutching the axe.

“How did you know?” she asked Victorique with a sorrowful look.

“That he wasn’t dead?”

Kazuya was about to say that now was not the time for questions, but he shut his mouth when he saw Julie's face, distraught and ashen.

Victorique frowned slightly. "Elementary," she said in her usual tone. She sounded like they weren't even in any grave danger. "The Wellspring of Wisdom told me so."

"Please verbalize it," Kazuya said.

Victorique nodded grudgingly. "It's simple. The way his body was lying on the floor was strange, wasn't it? He was face down, and his right hand was hidden under his body. Almost as if he didn't want anyone touching it. While his left hand was out in the open. Like he wanted his pulse checked on that hand."

"Now that you mention it..."

"If you accidentally triggered a trap, would you end up in that position? The most natural stance would be to have both arms outstretched in front of you. His position was clearly odd."

"But he didn't have a pulse," Kazuya said. "I'm sure of it."

"Yeah..." Julie's face was pale as a corpse's, and her lips were quivering. "Back then, he didn't have a pulse too," she mumbled to herself.

"Back then?"

"I-It's nothing. Continue, little detective."

Victorique gave a snort. She didn't like the nickname. "There's a way to stop your pulse temporarily."

"How?"

"You tuck a ball in your armpit."

Kazuya and Julie gasped. They looked at each other, blinking repeatedly.

"I see..."

Ned was fiddling with a tennis ball the whole time. By putting it in his armpit and closing it tight...

"He stopped his pulse temporarily," Victorique said, "and made whoever checked for a pulse think that he was dead. Once I realized the truth, I called you, Kujou."

"You mean when you said you wanted him by your side because you were scared?" Julie teased.

Victorique's cheeks flushed. "I wasn't actually scared! I had to say that, or this third son of an imperial soldier wouldn't have budged."

"Please stop calling me that."

“Oh? Do you prefer the brilliant third son of an imperial soldier?”

“Argh! You’re really pissing me off!”

Julie watched the two arguing with sorrowful eyes.

The three made it onto the deck.

Dawn was breaking, the light of the morning sun shining on the wet deck. The heavy rain falling through the night had subsided, but it hadn’t completely stopped. Towering waves surged eerily on the dark sea.

The radio room was there waiting for them, like a lodge built on the side of a mountain. The deck was slippery. Kazuya panicked every time Victorique stumbled.

Just as they were about to enter the radio room, Julie, who was following behind, let out a scream.

Kazuya quickly spun and saw a thick arm pulling Julie’s long, raven hair from behind.

It was Ned Baxter.

“Nooo!” Julie shrieked.

Ned Baxter’s eyes were bloodshot, his mouth wide open. He looked like an evil beast that children saw in their nightmares. An agonized cry echoed as Ned twisted Julie’s neck. The axe she was holding fell to the deck.

Ned tossed Julie’s limp body aside and strode toward Kazuya. Victorique was paralyzed by fear.

“V-Victorique... Over here!”

Kazuya dragged Victorique and started running, stumbling several times on the slippery deck.

He opened the door to the radio room. After letting Victorique in, he proceeded to close the door. Victorique reached with her small hand and pulled Kazuya.

“You stay here and call for help!” Kazuya said.

“What about you?”

“I have to deal with that guy somehow. Or he’s going to kill you.”

“Kujou...”

“I...” Kazuya shivered at the sight of the approaching Hound. “I’m the one who brought you here. It’s my responsibility to get you home safely.”

“You’re wrong!”

Her voice was shaky, and she looked in pain. There was something she wanted to say, but she couldn’t find the right words. For a while, her mouth

just gaped open and shut.

“I wanted to come here,” she finally said. “I found the invitation.”

“No. This is my fault.”

“Think logically, and you’ll know who’s respon—”

“It doesn’t matter!” Kazuya stamped his foot.

Victorique also stamped her feet several times.

“I have to keep you safe, or my pride as the third son of an impe—”

Suddenly, Kazuya thought the words “third son of an imperial soldier” sounded like a curse to his ears. He wouldn’t be able to convey his true feelings to her like this. Like their previous conversation, they wouldn’t be on the same page.

“No. It’s not that.” Kazuya tried his best to be honest. “I just want to help you.”

Victorique’s face contorted. She looked sad. She tried to say something.

Kazuya moved to close the door.

Victorique no longer had the calm, cynical, and collected look characteristic of the aristocracy. The invisible, thin barrier that had always separated Victorique from the world was gone, revealing the face of an uneasy young girl.

Kazuya put pressure on the door. Victorique’s green eyes, anxious like a lost puppy’s, were the last thing he saw.

“K-Kujou...” Her voice was so quiet, no one could hear it. “Please, Kujou. Stay with me. Let’s go home together. I don’t want to be alone. Kujou...!”

Kazuya closed his eyes and slammed the door shut.

The next moment, the Hound attacked.

Clenching his hand tight, Kazuya readied himself. He recalled the hand-to-hand fighting techniques that his older brothers taught him back in his island country. His brothers were very passionate, and Kazuya was confident in his ability to remember. It’s what made him brilliant.

Kazuya pulled back his fist and thrust it as hard as he could toward Ned’s nose.

Taking Kazuya’s punch to the face, Ned staggered a little. With the palm of his hand, he stroked his face from top to bottom, and when his hand moved away, there was a bizarre smile plastered on his face. Kazuya found it terrifying. He punched harder, as if to knock down something scary.

There was a dull thud. Blood trickled from Ned's nose. As he stroked his face from top to bottom again, blood stuck on his palm.

The moment Ned saw it, his eyebrow twitched. He was angry.

Abruptly, Ned jumped and landed on top of Kazuya, knocking him back. Kazuya's back slammed hard against the deck. Ned mounted him and punched him in the face over and over. He was losing consciousness.

It's just like that time, Kazuya thought. When I was crawling on the tatami mat, shaking.

What awaited Kazuya back then was his older brothers, who were much stronger. But right now, it was different. He was in a foreign country, far away from his home, and he was alone with the girl he became friends with. If he lost, it would mean losing their lives. Only a cruel ending awaited at the hands of defeat.

Gritting his teeth, Kazuya persevered. The instant Ned's movements slowed a little, he swung his fist upward. Ned's face was bombarded by Kazuya's punches.

Oddly enough, Kazuya didn't feel out of breath. As he wondered why, a thought occurred to him. Recently, he had been climbing up and down the maze of stairs in St. Marguerite's library every day. Victorique had mocked him for it, saying it was good exercise, but it actually ended up boosting his stamina.

Kazuya's punches knocked Ned's head back several times. But he kept coming back. Stained with blood, the man's face looked like an eerie red mass of something. Kazuya hit him over and over.

Ned began choking Kazuya. Slowly, his consciousness was fading.

I'm not going to lose... Never!

But the strength of a fully-grown man was too much for Kazuya. He was slowly losing strength.

Victorique...!

Kazuya opened his eyes. His vision was hazy.

He grit his teeth and hit Ned in the temple with all he had. Ned's hold on his neck weakened. Breathing hard, Kazuya snapped his eyes open.

With each breath, his vision gradually returned. Kazuya stood up. He took a few steps back and leaned against the railing. Ned, his face covered in blood, also rose to his feet and tottered toward him.

A shadow appeared behind the man. Kazuya strained his eyes.

It was Julie. She had regained consciousness and was slowly coming toward him, axe in her hand. When their eyes met, she pressed her forefinger to her lips. Kazuya nodded.

Ned raised his fist again and swung it down at Kazuya's head.

Kazuya quickly crouched down and slipped between Ned's legs to get behind him. Ned had lost his target, and with his weight shifted to the front, he pitched forward. Julie brandished the axe and slammed it into Ned's back with all her strength. The axe dug into his back at an angle. Ned howled like a wounded beast.

Julie pulled her trembling hands away from the axe.

Before Ned could turn around, Kazuya grabbed both of the man's legs and lifted him up.

Ned's body flipped over. With the axe on his back, he fell head first over the railing and into the sea.

Kazuya rushed to the railing and looked down.

Splash!

A huge wave swallowed Ned's body. White foam bubbled. A couple of waves rolled past, and Ned Baxter's body vanished into the bottom of the sea.

Julie also approached the railing. "Thanks, kid," she said, breathing raggedly.

"No, thank you."

"You did well." She gave a thin smile.

White waves rolled across the surface. The sea at daybreak was quiet. They were silent for a while, watching the dark sea that had swallowed Ned whole.

In the radio room, Victorique was sending out an SOS to the coast guard. Her small frame sitting in front of the large square machine looked like a doll that someone placed there as a joke, but her pale face and the quick movement of her hands indicated she was anything but a doll.

The door opened. Victorique's shoulders jerked.

When Kazuya walked in, she appeared as if she would cry from relief. The next moment, however, she returned to her usual calm and slightly cynical expression typical of the nobility.

"You're fine by the looks of it," she said.

When Julie entered next, Victorique frowned a little.

“I take it you called for help?” Julie asked, oblivious to the girl’s expression.

“Of course. They’ll be here soon. By the way...” Wearing a grim look, Victorique shrugged. “It seems we are not far from the port where we departed. They wondered how we could be in trouble so close to land. It took a lot of effort to explain over the radio.”

Victorique stood up and walked over to Kazuya. He was removing the brass knuckles from his hand.

She looked like a tiny, intricate doll. But to prove that she was not a doll, there was an inexplicable expression on her face—a mix of relief, fear, and something else.

Wordlessly, Victorique squeezed Kazuya’s hand tight.

Several minutes after they were rescued by the coast guard, the cruise ship Queen Berry sank to the bottom of the sea with a loud roar.

It was a spectacular sight. The sinking ship created waves, then vanished, leaving behind a calm sea, almost as if nothing had been there from the beginning.

Unlike the Queen Berry, the rescue boat was a plain and sturdy vessel. The deck was well-used, and the paint on the railings was peeling and mottled in places.

Weaving through the rescue personnel, two young men wearing hunting caps came shuffling toward them. For whatever reason, they were holding hands. Inspector Grevil de Blois’ men. Their faces were pale.

“Oh, thank heavens!” one said after confirming Victorique’s safety. “You’re alive! It’s a miracle!”

“Oh, no. The ship sank!” the other added.

They were making a big fuss.

Victorique was leaning against the deck railing, staring at the surface of the sea. Her long golden hair, like glistening threads, swayed in the sea breeze. The white lace of her magnificent dress was stained, and there was dirt and frays here and there. She looked heartbroken.

Kazuya stood beside her. “What are you looking at?”

Victorique looked up and gave a faint smile. She leaned into Kazuya’s ear and whispered, like she was going to tell him a big secret.

“I like beautiful things,” she said. With her small finger, she pointed to the surface of the sea, with its fiery red waves and reflection of the morning sun.

The rain had stopped. The boat was bathed in bright morning light. The sun, dyeing the sea red, was beaming on them.

Kazuya realized that this was the first time his little golden friend had told him what she liked. He felt like she had told him something special. Kazuya smiled.



Side by side they stood, staring at the scenery for a while.

“Let’s come again someday,” Kazuya finally said.

“...Again?”

“Yeah. We’ll come see the sea again.”

Victorique gave a wan smile. “Again, huh?”

“Hmm?”

“It’s nothing, Kujou. Nothing...”

The morning sun was slowly rising, its harsh red light now a soft glow.

The boat was approaching land.

Softly, the waves rolled across the sea.

Julie Guile got off the boat. Keeping her head down to avoid attention, she walked away from the ship, her steps gradually hastening, until she was practically running.

I see now, she thought.

A ship docked at the harbor, and people began disembarking. There were shouts of sailors and workers unloading cargo. People boarded the ship for a long journey, and families gathered to see them off. Luggage was being carried out and brought in. The harbor was filled with the hustle and bustle of the morning.

Julie blended in with the hubbub. Naturally, the police told her to stay, but she paid them no heed. She scurried away through the crowded port.

Once she was off the boat, the woman named Julie Guile would be gone. She only needed to get into the city and she would no longer be found.

She failed to notice the men following her. A pair of people skipping along, holding hands. They were both wearing hunting caps.

“That’s what you did back then,” she murmured. “I get it now.”

Tears glistened in her eyes as memories came flooding back. No. Memories was too pure a word to describe it.

It was a nightmare. A night filled with horror and torment.

You had us fooled, Huey.

A Hound released into a pack of Hares. Ned Baxter, also known as Huey.

That’s how you pretended to be dead!

Monologue 4

I shoved the heart-shaped pendant into my pocket and stood up. Slowly, I padded down the dark staircase back to the corridor.

But as I made it halfway down, something unexpected occurred.

Screams and gunshots sounded from a distance.

I ran, scrambling down the stairs, and leaped into the poorly-lit, shabby corridor.

What I saw froze me in place.

“...Huey!”

The others were lying on top of each other in the hallway. The small French girl was face-down, protecting Lee. The stocky Italian boy had his back against the wall, staring mutely at the blood trickling from his shoulder. The skinny and curly-haired American boy was lying on his back, moaning. Yang was standing in front of them, blood dripping from his arms.

A skinny boy—Huey—stood amid the pandemonium.

When he heard my voice, he slowly turned around. I swallowed. There was no expression on his pale face. He looked like a horrifying marionette manipulated by some great power, not by his own will.

“Found the Hare,” he mumbled, grinning.

He was holding a machine gun in one hand. I surmised that he took it from the boys who drowned.

What they said last made sense now.

“Th-There’s a ghost!”

“It took the gun from us and threw us in here!”

They took the supposedly dead Huey as a ghost.

My friends were lying on the ground, bleeding all over.

Anger flared within me. I took out the gun in my pocket and aimed it at Huey’s chest.

“Put the gun down, Huey!”

“...How about you put yours down?”

Smiling, Huey pulled the trigger.

I felt a sharp sting on my right shoulder. By the time I realized I was shot, I was already kneeling on the floor. My gun rolled from my hand. Cold beads of sweat broke out on my forehead. I felt a chill.

Huey cheerfully sauntered toward me, and pointed the gun's muzzle at my head.

"Stop!"

Yang, his arm bleeding profusely, stood up and stepped between me and Huey. "I don't know why you're doing this, but you don't point a gun at a girl," he said, his voice shaking with anger.

"Whether you're a boy or a girl doesn't matter inside this box." Huey's voice was shaky, too. His eyes quivered, like he was scared of something. "Gender is irrelevant. It's your nationality that matters."

"...What do you mean?"

"I'm a collaborator. You are the Hares and I am the Hound. I've been ordered to gnaw you guys to death. I'm doing this for my country. And I'll finish the job!"

"Huey...?"

His enigmatic rambling and the sorrowful look on his face left me confused. All I could do was stare at him.

Huey raised the machine gun. "What happened here is the future. It's inevitable!"

Yang pounced. Huey pressed the muzzle to his chest and pulled the trigger.

A spray of blood splashed onto my face as Yang's body was blown back. The point-blank shot tore a huge hole in his chest. He fell to the floor with a loud thud you wouldn't expect from his small build. Blood poured out of him, quickly turning the old dark carpet a bright red.

I screamed.

Huey pointed the gun at me, and smiled. "Beg for your life."

I shot him a glare. His expression remain unchanged.

"...No," I said.

"Then die!"

The gun closed in on me. I shut my eyes.

When he pulled the trigger, there was a small click. I opened my eyes.

He had ran out of bullets. I immediately picked up the gun I had dropped and gripped it with my left hand.

Huey spun and started running. I pulled the trigger, aiming at him. I fired over and over, but none of the shots hit. I was losing consciousness from the bleeding on my shoulder.

The next thing I knew, I was crying my eyes out, my shoulders quivering. With each pull of the trigger, tears flooded my vision.

I glanced at the dead Yang, then stood up and tottered toward the others.

The American and Italian boys had been shot in the side and shoulder, respectively, but the bullets only grazed them; they managed to stand up when I called out to them. The French girl only fainted from shock.

When all three of them stood up, I carried Lee, who fell unconscious again from the blood loss. Her heart-shaped pendant was still in my pocket. I had to return it to her. We started walking again.

The Italian boy began talking to the wobbly American boy, as if to give him strength. He talked about his homeland. Not the kind of topic to be had in this situation.

“I used to live very close to the market. In the mornings, I would work at the stalls to earn some money. The stalls loaded with colorful vegetables were a sight to behold. I thought the taste and beauty of summer vegetables was second to none.”

The American boy gave a weak smile in agreement.

Suddenly, the French girl groaned. “How...?” The boys looked at her. She forced the words out of her mouth. “How is he alive? He was supposed to be dead...”

No one said a word.

No one knew the answer.

I went over it in my head countless times like a madman. Huey had no pulse back then.

Chapter 5: Game Over

After leaving the harbor, Julie Guile hailed a horse-drawn carriage in town. Her long raven hair bounced in the breeze, draping over her pallid face, then drifted again. The carriage rocked.

Julie was wearing a distant look, thinking. “Yes...” she muttered out loud. “I was the one who took Huey’s pulse. I was sure his pulse had stopped. Ever since then, I’ve been wondering how.”

It grew more and more noisy outside. The crowd of people in the city gave Julie relief. She had exacted her revenge, and successfully escaped.

“A beautiful day, wouldn’t you agree, young lady?” the driver said in a cheery voice.

Julie ignored him.

“It was cloudy just a while ago,” he continued nevertheless. “It’s going to be a good day.”

“...I suppose,” Julie replied in a low voice.

She beamed. Remembering Victorique brought a smile to her face. She probably didn’t know it, but in just an instant, that odd, beautiful girl answered the question she had been asking herself for ten years.

The tennis ball lying on the floor where Huey had supposedly collapsed.

Huey must have used the same trick ten years ago to fake his death. He instilled terror on the kids and became one of the reasons for their infighting. After that, he left the group and killed them one by one.

“I see now...”

She squeezed the heart-shaped pendant on her chest tight.

She got her revenge. The adults who locked the Hares in that Box and tortured them to death, as well as the Hound, were gone. It was all over. All she had to do now was go somewhere far away.

Suddenly, Julie noticed something strange.

The carriage was running on a different street, not to the station where Julie was to catch a train to a foreign country. The station was moving farther away.

“Where are you going?!” she asked the driver.

“Where, you ask?” The driver turned around.

He was a handsome young man, with the elegant features of a noble. There was a cynical twist to his mouth. He was wrapped in an overcoat that was too fine for a coachman, and wore an expensive-looking silk tie around his neck.

“Who are you?!” Julie exclaimed. His odd, drill-shaped hairstyle—she had never seen such hairdo before—arrested her attention.

“My name is Grevil.”

“Grevil, who?”

“Grevil the great inspector.”

“What?”

The driver pulled hard on the reins. The horse neighed and stopped in its tracks.

Footsteps clattered outside. Julie gulped. Before she knew it, several policemen had surrounded the carriage.

She looked around. She was in front of a police station. It was a square building with square windows lined with iron bars. The historic building had an intimidating vibe reminiscent of a prison. The dull orange brick walls seemed to be slowly closing in on her.

Julie looked closer.

A boy and a girl were standing in front of the station. An oriental boy—he said he was the third son of an imperial soldier—Kazuya Kujou, and the noble blonde girl, Victorique, whom Julie herself called a little detective. Holding hands, they were staring at her.

Julie shrugged. She turned to the driver and smiled. “I suppose it’s game over.”

“Looks like it,” the coachman replied.

He jumped down from the carriage, opened the door, and gracefully held out his hand to Julie. His pointy hair almost poked her on the face. Julie took his hand and stepped down the carriage.

“Julie Guile,” he said, throwing his chest out. “You’re under arrest for murder!”

Julie smiled for just a moment. Then her face turned ice-cold and expressionless as she walked toward the police station.

In a room at the police station, Julie Guile sat in front of Inspector Blois, Victorique, and Kazuya.

The inspector's two subordinates were locked outside, standing in front of the door, holding hands.

This police station was outside Inspector Blois' jurisdiction, but Victorique's tip urged him to take action. His distinguished background allowed him to act like he owned the place.

The room was poorly-lit and incredibly spacious. There was a plain long table in the middle of the room. The source of light was an incandescent lamp with focus solely on its functionality. The crude wooden chairs provided for them made squeaking noises with every little movement.

Julie Guile was sitting in one such chair with a curious look on her face. She turned to Victorique. "How did you know it was me?"

For some reason, Victorique and Inspector Blois opened their bags at almost the same time, took out their pipes, and put them in their mouths. After lighting them up, they each took one puff. Victorique regarded Julie, while the Inspector watched Victorique.

"The Wellspring of Wisdom," Victorique said curtly. When she noticed Julie, the inspector, and even Kazuya staring at her, she brushed back her long, golden hair and added, "Let me verbalize it, then. First and foremost, you lied."

"I lied?" Julie blinked a few times.

Victorique nodded. "You introduced yourself as the daughter of a wealthy family who grew up in a big mansion."

"How'd you know that was a lie?" Kazuya asked.

"Kujou, do you remember? She has a habit when deep in thought."

Victorique stood up and, mimicking Julie, started walking, fiddling with the pendant on her chest. She took five steps, stopped, and turned around. Another five steps, and turned. After doing it a few times, she lifted her head.

"...Hmm?"

"What do you mean 'hmm'?"

The puzzled looks on their faces irritated Victorique. "Think, you three, think. Would someone who grew up in a large mansion move like this?"

"What do you mean?"

“It’s a habit of people who live in a small place. So small that you can only take five steps before you bump into a wall.”

“So she lived in a small room?”

“That’s a possibility, but you can narrow it down some more.”

Victorique sat back in her chair. In her husky voice, she continued, “For example, a prison cell. Or a hospital room. A mansion’s attic. It’s what happens when you don’t go outside for a long time.”

Inspector Blois shifted uncomfortably, clearing his throat.

Victorique cast him a sidelong glance. “I was talking generally. Don’t read too much into it.”

The Inspector didn’t respond.

“I appreciate the permission to leave,” she added.

Kazuya eyed them both, bewildered by the strange atmosphere between them.

Victorique turned to Julie. “You lied about your identity. There’s one more important thing. You had a weapon on you the whole time.”

Kazuya gasped. “She did?”

“Yes. When Maurice found a weapon and tried to use it, she took out her own gun and shot the man dead. She said that she just found the gun, but that was also a lie.”

“How did you know?”

“Because of the weight of her bag.” Victorique pointed to Julie’s handbag. “When we first met you, that bag was very heavy. Kujou, do you remember getting hit by that bag? It made a loud thud.”

“Of course.”

“The gun was inside the bag then. That’s why it was heavy. After throwing the gun away, she accidentally dropped the bag, and I picked it up.”

“Yeah...”

Kazuya remembered when Victorique picked up the bag and tossed it to Julie. It flew softly through the air.

“Ned Baxter didn’t try to kill us because he was the culprit. I suspect he was also involved in the incident ten years ago. Like Maurice, he was scared because he believed that there was a Hare in our midst who wanted revenge. And he wanted to kill them before they killed him.”

Silence descended in the room.

Eventually, Julie nodded. “That’s right.” Her expression was strangely bright. She looked relieved that she was caught and her crimes exposed. “I did it,” she said bluntly. “I prepared the ship and wrote the invitations. I was going to kill them all and sink the ship. But there was an unexpected miscalculation. Roxane was already dead, and two unrelated individuals came on board instead. I panicked. I couldn’t let you die, so I was on edge the whole time.”

Julie gave a thin smile. “Looking at you two reminded me of the past. There was a Chinese boy named Yang. He was kind and reliable. He really helped us a lot. Unfortunately, he was killed by Ned Baxter. Kujou, you remind me of him.”

“Can you tell us what happened ten years ago?” Inspector Blois interrupted.

Julie nodded. “Sure.”

Julie Guile began to speak.

One night, ten years ago. How she was taken from the streets of this town and thrown into a black carriage with iron bars. Waking up on a ship, the real Queen Berry, with several other kids. The beginning of a night of horror.

The deaths of her friends. Huey’s betrayal. Leading her wounded friends up to the deck.

And what the surviving Hares found there.

Monologue 5

We trudged down the flooded corridor, up the stairs on the bow side, and onto the deck.

Lee's limp body was growing heavier and heavier on my back. My knees trembled with each step I took. But I was the only one who could carry her. The two boys were losing blood from the wounds Huey had inflicted, their faces gradually turning pale, while the other girl was crying from shock. I couldn't just leave Lee behind.

I couldn't tell if Lee was still alive. Her dark hair bobbed as I climbed up the stairs. Her chocolate-brown skin had lost its healthy color.

Finally, we reached the deck.

Dawn was breaking.

When we went up the deck last night, the deep darkness prevented us from seeing anything. But now, the pearly light of dawn from the eastern skies was shining on the deck. Waves rolled gently on the gray sea.

Legs shaking and covered in blood, we headed to the radio room, one step at a time.

When we opened the door, white smoke was rising to the ceiling, obstructing our vision like a fog.

The people in the room—nine grown men—all turned to us simultaneously.

Some were playing card games. Some smoked cigars. Some were looking down at their books.

Wisps of white smoke rose from the cigar to the ceiling.

When the men saw us, their mouths dropped open. Then they shouted in unison.

“Where are you from?!”

“Tell me your nationality! Who died?! Where were they from?!”

“This one's from Sauville! Where are the Allies?!”

They grabbed us by the shoulders and shook us.

A man who had been drinking brandy stood up. He was relatively younger than the rest, seemingly in his mid-thirties.

He grabbed the arm of an elderly gentleman. “Now, now. First, we must applaud their efforts.”

“Maurice...”

“Come on.”

The man called Maurice regarded us as we stood there dumbfounded. He raised both arms and put his palms together.

“Welcome, brave Hares!”

The other men followed his lead and started clapping as well.

Their smiles almost drove me mad.

As soon as I relaxed a little, Lee fell from my back. “Lee!” I called, bending down.

One man looked at us. He studied Lee’s black hair and brown skin.

The man snorted. “Arabian, huh?” he said, kicking Lee.

I screamed out. Lee wasn’t moving. Maybe she was really dead.

I squeezed the heart-shaped pendant in my pocket tight. Tears welled up in my eyes.

The men studied us.

“I trust the English one is alive?”

“Of course. He’s a Hound. He came back alive.”

“As for the rest... France, Italy, the US, and Sauvile.”

They exchanged looks and nodded.

There was a creepy person in the back of the room, sitting in a wheelchair. Their head was covered with a red cloth. Wrinkled skin hid half of their eyes.

It was an old woman.

In front of her lay a silver jar, a copper jar, and a glass jar. She grabbed a golden hand mirror with her wrinkled hands.

“A young man will soon die...” Her voice was soft.

The men turned around. “Madame Roxane!”

“It will be the beginning of everything,” she continued. “The world will turn to stone and start to tumble.”

The room fell silent.

“Fulfill the prophecy. If you do, this country will prosper.”

“Understood!” The men bowed.

I was petrified and confused.

Prophecy? What is she talking about?

Eventually, the old woman shook her head. “The Running of the Hares ends here!” she declared in a hoarse voice. “Sink the box immediately. And fatten up the Hares!”

Chapter 6: Never Let Go

Julie finished her long confession.

The room was still and quiet.

Two thin wisps of white smoke rose to the ceiling from the pipes in Victorique's and Inspector Blois' hands. No one said a word.

"I never knew why they did it," Julie finally muttered. "It was hard. Victorique, the little detective. Perhaps you can shed a light on the matter?"

Kazuya raised his head. Julie was biting her lip as she stared at Victorique.

Kazuya glanced at Victorique's face. She seemed to have finished reconstructing the fragments of chaos and was pondering over how to verbalize it.

Inspector Blois' brain had reached full capacity. He was watching a small bird fly past outside the window with a distant look in his eyes. The tips of his pointy blond hair glittered under the golden morning sunlight pouring through the window. He had removed the pipe from his mouth; it was smoldering in the hand of the pensive inspector, seemingly forgotten.

Slowly, carefully, Victorique opened her mouth. "I think it was a large-scale divination."

"A divination?!" Julie snapped. She shook her head. "So many kids died. The ship sank. All for a divination? A divination for what? How? It must've cost a lot too."

"Kujou, I've explained it to you before."

Kazuya jumped. "Wh-What?"

"Ancient divination. Specifically, rhabdomancy, as performed by the prophet Moses."

"Oh, yeah. I think you did."

"In order to know from which tribe the future leader of the Israelites would be born, he prepared twelve sticks with the name of each tribe on them. The fate of those sticks determined the fate of the tribe."

"Ahuh..."

“Roxane the fortune-teller kept Hares in her garden. Sometimes, she would set a Hound loose on them. Some are killed and some survive. The survivors are fattened up and raised with care.” Victorique paused. Julie’s face grew darker and darker. “I believe Roxane used Hares for divination. Each one was given the name of the person to be divined and they were released among hounds. She told the future based on which Hares survived.”

“Are you telling me that the Hares were us?”

Victorique nodded.

“But why? We’re not hares, we’re humans.”

“We can assume that a large-scale divination of the future was necessary, the kind that’s never been done before that. Data can be analyzed from several fragments of chaos. Eleven orphans of different nationalities gathered from all over the world. Roxane’s words: ‘A young man will soon die. It will be the beginning of everything. The world will turn to stone and start to tumble.’ The remark of a man who was present: ‘Where are the Allies? Huey’s words, ‘What happened here is the future. It’s your nationality that matters.’” She dropped her voice. “And it happened ten years ago, in the spring of 1914.”

Kazuya let out a yelp. They all looked at him, and he quickly said, “U-Uh, sorry. There was the Sarajevo Incident in June ten years ago that sparked the world war. It’s probably unrelated, right?”

“But it is. That is, in fact, the answer.”

“What do you mean?!” Julie demanded.

At the end of June 1914, the heir to the Austrian throne was assassinated in Sarajevo. The Serbian government, with the support of other states, denied Austria’s demand for the extradition of the assassin. Austria-Hungary, Germany, and other countries joined together to start a war. Russia, France, and Britain fought against them, and the war soon expanded globally.

“We can only speculate now, though,” Victorique added. “I think that, ten years ago, government officials who sensed a foul atmosphere brewing over the world used a famous fortune-teller to know the future. They set up a large stage, a box called the Queen Berry, and released Hares from all over the world inside. An English boy played the role of the Hound. Inside

the box full of traps, the boys and girls carried the future of their respective countries on their shoulders.”

“That’s absurd!”

“The divination came true.” Victorique brushed back her hair. “Recall the world war. Hey, mediocre egghead Kujou.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Tell us the outcome of the war.”

Confused, Kazuya reluctantly spoke. “The World war was fought between the Central Powers and the Allied Powers. It ended with the victory of the Allies. The Central Powers were comprised of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey…”

“And the Allies?”

“Let’s see… France, Italy, Britain, the United States, and Sauville…”

Victorique stared at Julie. There was no expression in her eyes.

Julie was biting her lip hard. “It can’t be…”

“The divination came true.”

“…”

“In that ship, the kids ended up in two groups, the Allies and the Central Powers. First, the Hungarian girl died in a trap, and the Turkish boy was shot dead. And the British boy survived by using deceit. Yes, the British were the tricksters of that war. The German and Austrian boys also died, and the Chinese boy was gunned down. And the Arab girl…”

“Lee…!”

“The Arabs got caught up in the war. They lost part of their territory and were left in tatters.”

Julie was crying now. Watching her, Victorique looked a little troubled. She took out an expensive-looking handkerchief from her pocket and gingerly handed it to her. After Julie wiped her tears, Victorique looked somewhat relieved.

“So they based their subsequent political activities on our actions that night,” Julie said, sniffing.

“Yes.” Victorique nodded. “Sauville joined the World War on the side of the Allies. History was set in motion. It’s hard to say how much of this was coincidence and how much was inevitable now that Roxane and the others involved are dead, but the divination came true. Of course, only subjectively, not objectively. Needless to say, the results of the large-scale

divination, the Running of the Hares, served as a device for the politicians, aristocrats, and foreign officials to avoid responsibility.”

Julie lifted her head. “That’s just horrible.”

Slowly, she started to talk about herself. Unable to recover from the shock, she spent a long time in a sanatorium. When she finally calmed down and was released, she began looking into what happened back then.

Some of the surviving kids had committed suicide, while another was sentenced for murder. None of them were doing well. She didn’t know if Lee was alive or dead. She thought that maybe she already died back at the radio room.

The only one who was alive and well was Huey, who had changed his name to Ned Baxter. When she found an article about his success as a stage actor, she decided to add him to her list of targets for revenge.

Ten years later.

She had received a lot of money, presumably because of Roxane’s advice to fatten them up. She used all of it to build a replica of the Queen Berry. After that, she sent out invitations.

Her targets gathered. Except for Roxane, who had already been killed.

The room was so calm and quiet that it was hard to believe they were talking about something depressing and gruesome. It was probably partly because Julie herself was calm as she talked.

Julie looked up. “Since when did you know it was me?”

Victorique was silent for a while. “I became sure when you shot Maurice. But I first suspected you right after we woke up in that lounge.”

Julie was taken aback. “How?”

“You were right next to the door. When you tried to open it, you made a fuss about it being locked. But when another man tried it, it opened easily. Then an arrow from a bow gun came flying and killed him.”

“Yeah.”

“The door was never locked. The reason you made such a fuss about it being locked was to keep us in the room. You needed to rip off the wallpaper and show them the bloody words. To let them know what was going on. You decided to kill them afterwards. Am I wrong?”

“No...” Julie gazed at Victorique’s small face.

Victorique looked away first. “I had no proof. It was mere speculation at that point in time.”

“I see...” Julie chuckled, then pointed at Kazuya. “That’s why you were holding this boy’s hand so tightly. He was talking to me, not knowing that I was the culprit.”

Victorique gave a grunt.

“You were being mean the whole time, but you never let go of his hand. You were so worried about him.”

Victorique played dumb.

Surprised, Kazuya eyed them both. He recalled the time they were running inside the ship. He was holding Victorique’s hands to protect her, but he wondered if Victorique herself was concerned about him.

When it was time to leave the room, Julie mumbled, “Little detective.”

“Please stop calling me that.”

“Oh, come on now. You know, when I first saw you, I thought you looked familiar.” Julie peered at Victorique’s face. “I remember now.”

Inspector Blois, who was standing beside her, gave a jerk.

“From the sanatorium. I met a woman there who looked just like you. I wonder who that was.”

For a split second, Victorique’s green eyes widened. She shook her head. “Who knows?”

“Your sister? Or perhaps...”

“...”

Victorique didn’t answer. Instead, she waved Julie goodbye.

The interrogation had ended.

They exited the room into the hallway. Uniformed officers and men who looked like detectives streamed past the wide corridors. Occasionally, they would glance back at Kazuya and Victorique, wondering what children were doing in a police station.

When they turned the corner, two men wearing hunting caps came running toward them. Inspector Blois stopped.

“Inspector,” one said.

“We just received information,” the other added.

They were swinging their linked arms.

“The maid who killed Roxane has been caught.”

“She’s being brought in now. Oh, look, here she comes!”

Julie Guile gulped as she looked at the direction he pointed at.

Policemen were escorting a beautiful Arab woman from both sides. Her dark hair and supple, chocolate-colored skin glistened under the light in the hallway.

When the woman looked up and saw Julie, she swallowed too.

Both of them had grown up; they looked so different now. But when they looked into each other's eyes, they found the same sparkle from back then.

"Lee... is that you?" Julie asked.

Lee seemed in doubt as well. "Alex?"

Their brief ten-year reunion ended as they passed each other in the hallway.

"Inspector, is she the one who killed Roxane?" Julie asked as she watched Lee go.

"Yes."

"I see... After ten years, you got your revenge too."

Julie put her hand on her neck and grasped the heart-shaped pendant. She had kept it safe for the past ten years. Lee's lucky charm. She had treasured it. She returned to the stairs to retrieve it and give it back to her, but she wasn't able to. She pulled the pendant from her neck.

"Lee!" Julie tossed the pendant in the air.





Lee turned around. She shook off the officers' hands, stretched her arm out, and caught the pendant.

"I'm returning your lucky charm," Julie said.

Lee, who did not understand the language, nodded. She raised one hand and made a small waving gesture, before being taken by the cops. They then turned the corner, and disappeared.

Julie Guile stood there for a while, staring at the empty hallway.

Epilogue: A Promise

“...And so, after the ghosts of the past were avenged, the ghost ship Queen Berry sank back into bottom of the dark sea.”

It was a fine morning.

Behind the school building of St. Marguerite Academy, two teenagers were sitting on the three-flight stairs overlooking a flower garden, talking face-to-face.

Colorful flowers were in full bloom in front of them, glittering under the sunlight. The sweet scent of flowers tickled their nostrils. They could hear students talking as they walked along the small pathway between the flowerbeds. The staircase seemed to be a great place that no one knew about; there was no one around except for the two of them. It was a comfortable spot, like an empty air pocket in the crowded school.

One of them was a small, earnest-looking Oriental boy, while the other was a slender Caucasian girl with short blond hair swaying in the wind.

The girl—Avril Bradley, an exchange student from England—was listening to the boy with her big eyes wide open.

Staring at her face, Kazuya Kujou felt triumphant inside.

Good, good, he thought. I totally got her. Hers was just a ghost story, but mine actually happened.

He nodded to himself, certain of his victory.

I win! Yahoo!

Avril burst into laughter.

“Huh?”

“Oh, come on, Kujou. Kyahahaha!”

For some reason, Avril was flailing her arms and legs, laughing hysterically. Her slender, smooth legs dazzled Kazuya’s eyes every time the breeze lifted her skirt.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Because that’s not possible.”

Avril wiped away the tears in her eyes with the back of her hand. “Oh, Kujou...”

“It’s true!”

“Riiiiight. Just so you know, I’m never buying it.” Avril held up her forefinger in front of Kazuya’s face and waved it from side to side. “Nyeah!”

Kazuya’s eyes narrowed as he watched her finger. *What does she mean by that?* he wondered.

“That truant Victorique is actually a girl, a very beautiful one at that, and a great detective?”

“I-It’s true! If you want, you can come with me to the top floor of the library. Victorique is really there!”

“No way! I’m not falling for that one.”

Avril wore an infuriating look and stuck her tongue out at Kazuya. She looked very cute. Kazuya fell silent.

“Besides, I don’t want to go all the way up those set of stairs. I can’t believe someone would even do such a thing.”

“...”

Victorique said the same thing... Kazuya’s spirits sank.

“Also, there’s a story about the library too,” Avril said, dropping her voice low. “They say a golden fairy lives at the top... Kyaaaaa!”

Kazuya let out a shriek.

“Hahaha! You screamed. I got you again, scaredy-cat!”

“That one doesn’t count. Your scream surprised me. I’m not scared of anything. Besides, that story is actually true. She’s not a fairy, though, but a human being. Then again, she’s like, extraordinary, so I guess you can say she’s not human. Anyway, Victorique is—”

“All right. Enough with the bragging.” Avril snapped her fingers.

“...Sorry,” Kazuya apologized despite himself.

Am I imagining things, or ever since coming to this country, I’ve been apologizing nonstop to girls my age even though I’m not at fault?

Avril grinned. “I have no idea why you even came up with that story. I already know the source. I also read this morning’s paper.”

“...This morning’s paper?”

“Ta-da!” Wearing a smug look, Avril showed the newspaper. “It’s this one, right? I already knew everything.”

“A-Ah...” Kazuya stammered.

Avril was perplexed at his reaction. Her pretty face peeked from behind the newspaper.

“What’s wrong, Kujou?”

“H-H-He did it again.”

“Huh?”

The newspaper headline read: **Inspector Blois Does it Again! The Case of the Ghost Ship, Queen Berry, Solved!**

Kazuya grabbed the newspaper and stood up.

Avril looked at him, baffled. “Wh-What’s the matter?”

“Something came up. See you later, Avril!”

Leaving a startled Avril in the flower garden, Kazuya bolted away.

A petite woman was walking along the narrow path between the flowerbeds, her shoulder-length brunette bobbing. She had large round glasses and a baby face with droopy eyes like a puppy. It was their homeroom teacher, Ms. Cecile.

When she saw Kazuya, she smiled. “Kujou. Just who I needed.”

“Oh, Teach. I’m in a bit of a hurry…”

“If you’re in a hurry, that means you’re headed to the library, right?”

“No… Well, yes, actually. How’d you know?”

Ms. Cecile chuckled. “When you’re in a hurry, there’s only one explanation. Here, take this. Please give it to Victorique.” As usual, she handed him some printouts.

“Why is that the only explanation?” Kazuya mumbled, then took off.

Avril came a second later. “Huh. So he’s going to see Victorique,” she muttered as she watched Kazuya go.

Smiling, Ms. Cecile nodded. “Yes. They’re very close.”

“What kind of a boy is he?”

Ms. Cecile blinked a few times. She then waved her forefinger. “You don’t know? Victorique is a girl.”

“Whaaaaat?! So she’s actually a girl? I see… And her last name… Was he actually telling the truth?” She cocked her head, then shook it. “Nah, no way. He definitely made that up.”

A warm early spring breeze blew past, tousling their hair and the hem of their skirts.

The sky was a clear blue. It was looking like a good day.

“I see. Victorique is a girl. Hmmm...” Avril pouted. “Makes me a little jealous.”

Once more, a warm spring breeze whirled around.

Avril’s skirt and short blond hair fluttered. The colorful flowers blooming in the flowerbed danced in the wind.

“Victorique!!”

St. Marguerite Grand Library. One of the most historic buildings in Europe, with more than three hundred years worth of history behind it.

Shaped like a polygonal tube, the building’s entire walls themselves were giant bookshelves. Majestic religious paintings adorned the high ceiling. Only a narrow wooden staircase connected the bookshelves in this mysterious building. Its inside was like a giant maze.

It was said that a long time ago, the king deliberately built this maze to indulge in the company of his mistress.

This morning, Kazuya was running up the maze of stairs, calling out a girl’s name.

“Victorique!”

“You don’t have to shout. I can hear you.”

It came from the uppermost floor.

A wisp of smoke rose toward the ceiling. A young girl with long, beautiful golden hair hanging to the floor like a turban was smoking a pipe. The smoke from the pipe drifted up to the skylight, where bright light streamed in.

The girl was sitting on the floor of the dense and green botanical garden, reading through several books spread out in a circle around her. She seemed bored, but she went through them at great speed. She looked like a broken doll.

It was Victorique.

Kazuya made it up the stairs, breathing hard.

Victorique shot him a glance. “Commendable effort coming here every day.”

“Now, listen here.”

“Your daily routine is to run up these stairs while screaming at the top of your lungs, placing a huge strain on your heart. You turn pale when you

look down, and your thighs feel very sluggish. You are one very strange exchange student.”

“And you think you have nothing to do with it? I come here to see you.”

“I know that. I’m merely stating a fact.”

“Yeah, right. I can sense the spite.”

“And?”

“...Nothing.”

After returning to the academy, Victorique returned to her aloof—and a little cynical—self. The same Victorique that he was used to seeing in this library.

Realizing that he stood no chance in a verbal argument, Kazuya backed down. He then held out the newspaper he took from Avril.

“Anyway, look at this.”

Quivering with anger, he studied Victorique’s face, but she seemed unconcerned. After skimming the news article, she nodded.

“I see.”

“This is all your deduction. They caught the culprit because you tipped them off. Your explanation, your reasoning, they just copied it all. Back then, Inspector Blois was looking at the birds out the window. He had this distant look on his face, like he had no idea what was going on. I can’t stand this.”

Victorique yawned. “My brother is an egomaniac,” she said, looking uninterested.

“Exactly. That inspector is an egomaniac. Wait a sec... What did you just say?”

“My brother is an egomaniac.”

“One question: who’s your brother again?”

Victorique scowled in puzzlement. She removed the pipe from her mouth and blew out a white smoke. “Grevil.”

“...Oh, okay.”

“Yes.”

“Whose brother?”

“Mine.”

“Hmm... Wait, whaaaaaaat?!”

He fastened his eyes at Victorique’s figure, glamorous and well-proportioned, like an exquisite doll, but too small. Then he thought of

Inspector Blois, handsome and stylish, but with a crazy hairstyle.

He could not process it. His head dropped to his hands.

His eyes fell to the printout he had received from Ms. Cecile. It had fallen on the floor. He'd been delivering them to Victorique every day, but he had never taken a good look at them.

He knew that Victorique was of noble blood. It was easy to tell by her demeanor and mannerisms. *I think her name's Victorique de something...*

"Whoa..."

Victorique's full name was on the printout.

Victorique de Blois.

Kazuya lifted his vacant eyes and looked at her.

Victorique was staring back at him with the pipe in her mouth. "Kujou, are you all right? Your face looks weird."

"Why do you have the same family name as the inspector?"

"Because we're siblings?"

Kazuya screamed. Now that he thought about it, Victorique and the inspector didn't seem to have anything in common besides being nobles, but they shared a few habits, such as intently smoking pipes and blowing smoke into people's faces. Their looks or brains were nothing alike.

"Why?" Kazuya asked with a serious look.

"...Don't ask me."

Annoyed, Victorique looked away. But no matter which direction she turned, Kazuya kept following her and asked, "Why? Why Why?"

Victorique eventually gave in. "All this time, you didn't know?"

"Nope!"

"You are one odd fellow."

"B-B-But you never mentioned it once, did you?"

Victorique tilted her head. Her golden hair bobbed, glistening like silk curtain.

"I didn't," she said, yawning.

"Then of course I had no idea!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, keep it down."

Displeased by the topic, Victorique became grumpy. Ignoring Kazuya, she buried her head into the books, and immersed herself into reading. It almost seemed forced.

But Kazuya kept mumbling on and on.

Victorique lifted her head. "You're too loud."

"But..."

"To put it briefly," Victorique began wearily, "Grevil de Blois, also known as Marquis Blois, is the heir to the Blois family. He's an egomaniac, a womanizer, and an inept inspector, but he's the eldest son. He is our father's legitimate successor. We are blood-related, but we never see each other on official occasions."

"...Why not?"

"Because..." Victorique frowned. "My mother was a mistress. Grevil's mother is the official wife, with noble blood running through her veins. So we are half-siblings."

"But that still doesn't—"

"And my mother was a dangerous character. She was a dancer by profession, but she was also a madwoman. She got into some trouble in the last war, and... No, never mind."

For a moment, Victorique became talkative when it came to her mother, but she immediately went quiet afterward.

Kazuya recalled the stories that were rampant in the academy. Some were eerie rumors about Victorique herself.

She was an illegitimate daughter of a noble. Her family feared her so they sent her to this school because they didn't want her staying in the house. Her mother was a famous dancer who went crazy. She was the reincarnation of the legendary gray wolf.

Julie Guile, the culprit behind the Queen Berry case, mentioned seeing an older beautiful woman who looked just like Victorique in the sanatorium she was confined at.

Victorique hesitantly opened her mouth again. "In short, I was born to a noble and a dangerous person. And because I was different from normal children, I grew up in isolation deep inside the Blois mansion. Ever since I was sent to this school, I've been stuck here, unable to leave."

"I don't know what to say..."

"The only reason I was able to leave last week was because my brother gave me a special 'permission' to go out. On the condition that he accompanied me. He forgot about it and left, though. So I don't know when I'll be able to go out of this academy again."

"Victorique..."

Kazuya was speechless.

He recalled their trip last week. Victorique seemed unaccustomed to the outside. She leaned out of the train and carriage, staring at the scenery. The sight of the sun rising over the sea had captivated her.

When she said that she liked beautiful things, and Kazuya suggested they come back again, she gave a forlorn smile.

Puffing on her pipe, Victorique said jokingly, "I'm a damsel in distress. Doesn't fit me, does it?"

"..."

Silence fell over the garden.

Soft spring sunlight streamed in through the skylight, shining on the both of them. The green leaves of the lush vegetation swayed faintly in the gentle breeze blowing in from above. Unlike down on the surface, it was very quiet here. When the two remained silent, nothing else could be heard.

"And so the damsel is bored," Victorique said.

"Ahuh... Huh?"

Kazuya's face hardened. He had a bad feeling about this. When he looked up, he saw the same look on Victorique's face when she was acting like a spoiled brat. He couldn't explain what it was exactly, but he knew from experience.

"Ah, I'm bored."

"Anyway, I gotta go to my next class..."

As he tried to get up, Victorique pulled on his pants, and he fell on the floor.

"Oww!"

"I'm bored. Are you listening? I said I'm bored."

"I'm sorry...?"

He clearly had no reason to apologize, so his reply became a question.

Victorique started flailing around. "I said the damsel is bored! A mystery. I want a mystery."

"You can cry all you want, but there's nothing mysterious going on right now."

"Then you go downstairs for a bit and look for a mysterious case."

"No way. I'm not gonna find any."

"Then create one. Get yourself in some deadly trouble."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Victorique was getting more and more agitated. She must be bored out of her mind. “Ahh, so booooring! I might die from boredom. I probably will. Kujou, you will lose one of your few friends.”

“...Too far. A little more, and I’ll get mad.”

“So bored...”

It was suddenly quiet.

Hmm? Finding the silence strange, Kazuya peered at Victorique’s face. Her small head plopped onto him.

“Huh? V-Victorique! Are you dead? Did you die of boredom? That can’t be right. No one actually dies of boredom. Hey!”

snore

“Oh, you’re just sleeping. Don’t scare me like that.”

Victorique had fallen asleep with her little golden head resting on Kazuya’s shoulder. She was yawning a lot earlier. She must be really tired.

It wasn’t uncommon for a weekend adventure to leave you sleepy on the first morning of the week. It seemed to be a rarity for Victorique, though.

Kazuya gave up on attending the next class and continued to lend his shoulder to Victorique.

Just sitting there made him bored. She was right, he thought. He picked up one of the books she had left open, a philosophy book written in difficult Latin. He tossed it aside without reading a single page.

Birds chirped in the distance.

Spring.

A fine season.

Hugging his knees, Kazuya whispered to the sleeping Victorique. “Hey, Victorique. Someday...” He felt a little embarrassed. Figuring she was asleep anyway, he continued. “Let’s go out and watch the sun rise over the sea again.”

Victorique’s green eyes snapped open. “I will hold you to that promise.”

Softly, she closed her eyes again.



Gosick - Volume 01

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